Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Sonata of Beginnings

Miharu turned bright red and yelled loudly as soon as she processed Masato's words. Meanwhile, Latifa glared at Rio.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

"D-DOING THIS FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME... JUST DON'T BLAME ME FOR WHAT HAPPENS NEXT."
Tears rolled down Celia's cheek as she gently grabbed Rio's hand.

Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this story; he lives to avenge his mother's murder. Currently traveling as "Haruto" due to his arrest warrant issued in the Beltrum Kingdom.
His previous life was that of a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.

Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A rare humanoid spirit with missing memories.

Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.

Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. Her previous life was that of an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.

Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently traveling with Rio to study the outside world and broaden her horizons.

Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.

Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Feels resentment towards her half-brother Haruto.

Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Currently under the protection of Rio, along with Miharu and Aki.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Currently taking action with the hero named Sakata Hiroaki.

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Worries about her little sister from the shadows.

Roanna Fontaine
Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. Traveling with Flora as her attendant.

Sakata Hiroaki
A hero from another world.

Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

Shigekura Rui
A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Alfred Emarle
Commander of the Beltrum Kingdom's Royal Guard. Possesses the title "King's Sword," which is given to the strongest person in the kingdom.

Liselotte Cretia
Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild.

She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.

Aria Governess
Liselotte's head attendant and an enchanted sword wielder. Has been friends with Celia since their academy days.

Sumeragi Satsuki
Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

Charlotte Galarc
Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Monitors Satsuki but is also her friend.

Sendo Takahisa
Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

Lilianna Centostella
First Princess of the Centostella Kingdom. Currently at Takahisa's side in order to watch over him.

Chapter 1: After the Uproar

After knocking Takahisa off his feet and leaping down from the enchanted ship, Rio held Miharu in his arms as he landed gracefully in the rooftop garden. Satsuki and Charlotte stood in waiting.

“Haruto! Miharu! Are either of you hurt?!” As soon as Satsuki saw Rio with Miharu in his arms, she ran over in a hurry.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks to Haru-ku… Haruto,” Miharu replied, glancing up at Rio’s face. She met his eyes, then looked down in embarrassment. At the same time, Rio had a faint smile tugging at his lips, before letting Miharu down onto her feet.

“I see…” Satsuki seemed to sense the strange atmosphere as she watched Rio and Miharu’s expressions, wondering what on earth had happened. She was a little curious, but there were more important matters to address.

“What about Takahisa?”

“He’s still on the ship. Probably still knocked out,” Rio replied, looking up at the Centostella Kingdom’s enchanted ship flying far above them. The faint sense of guilt he felt was probably because he had punched Takahisa out of legitimate self-defense.

Satsuki blinked. “Knocked out… Hehe, I see,” she giggled.

“So what happens now?” Rio asked with a troubled expression.

“Now… Takahisa’s the one at fault here, since he tried to kidnap Miharu. I guess we’d have to bring him back and question him properly about why he did this. And it’ll have to be before the royals,” Satsuki said, her words laced with

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fury towards Takahisa. She glanced back at Charlotte, who had followed her.

“In that case, allow me to lead you three to Father,” Charlotte suggested calmly.

Satsuki looked up at the sky. “But if we don’t bring Takahisa back first, the enchanted ship might sail away from the capital like this…”

“There’s no need to worry. Sir Takahisa will be brought directly to the castle.” Charlotte spoke as though it was a settled matter.

“What?” Satsuki asked in confusion. Was it really something to be so calm about?

“The capital is currently surrounded by our kingdom’s enchanted ship fleet, so it would be extremely difficult for anyone to depart. Princess Lilianna is also with my father right now, so I cannot imagine the ship’s crew would forcibly charge through without their master on board. Doing so would even be considered a declaration of war against our kingdom,” Charlotte explained with a smile. It was almost as though she had planned for Takahisa’s rebellion in advance.

“…I see.” Satsuki gazed at her in awe. No matter how she looked at it, the preparations were too thorough.

…So an enchanted fleet has surrounded the capital, huh? Charlotte’s explanation seemed a little odd to Rio, too.

“…Why was the capital surrounded by an enchanted fleet?” Satsuki asked Charlotte.

Charlotte looked at Rio as she answered. “Sir Haruto’s efforts have greatly altered the outcome, but these were originally arrangements made to prevent Sir Takahisa’s scheme from succeeding,” she smiled impishly.

In other words, she knew that Miharu would be kidnapped, Rio guessed immediately, but wondered why she would stay silent about it.

Satsuki’s jaw dropped. “Char… Did you know that Takahisa was going to kidnap Miharu?” she asked.

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“Yes,” Charlotte nodded calmly. “I was half in doubt about whether he’d actually do so, but I had received warning from Princess Lilianna of the Centostella Kingdom in advance.”

“W-Wait, hold on! Does that mean you could have stopped Takahisa’s rampage before it escalated to this?” Satsuki objected in a fluster, but Charlotte remained calm as she answered.

“I devised this as a backup plan precisely because that would be difficult. I avoided acting in advance out of fear of the worst case scenario occurring.”

Satsuki regained her composure by hearing that and sighed. “The worst case scenario?”

“A scenario where Sir Takahisa uses his divine arms to go on a rampage inside the castle before taking off with Lady Miharu on the spur of the moment, to put it simply. There would almost certainly be casualties if that were to happen, and we would lose track of both Lady Miharu and Sir Takahisa.”

“Wha…” The Takahisa she knew would never do such a thing—that was the first thought that came to Satsuki’s mind, but she quickly accepted Charlotte’s conjecture as a possibility. Takahisa had, in fact, tried to kidnap Miharu after all.

“…Yeah, I see your point. Takahisa was really backed into a corner.”

“Thank you for understanding. After the duel with Sir Haruto, Princess Lilianna learned of Sir Takahisa’s scheme and warned him against it, but he wasn’t in the right state of mind to discuss things properly. He threatened her with quitting his hero role and forcefully made her promise to assist in Lady Miharu’s kidnapping.”

Satsuki looked pained to hear that. “I see…”

“It would normally be Princess Lilianna’s duty to follow the will of her kingdom’s hero, but this time was an exception. She pretended to make various arrangements to

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assist Sir Takahisa while secretly making contact with Father for his support in stopping him. This all happened merely an hour ago," Charlotte explained eloquently.

She could see he was on the verge of running amok anyway, so she wanted to let him do so in a controlled environment, huh? Rio guessed.

"And so, we had to move as secretly as possible in order to prevent the crime from happening with what little time we had. As a result, we had to overlook the risk of Lady Miharu being momentarily kidnapped, which was very regrettable. I'd like to extend my most sincere apologies, Lady Miharu." Charlotte finished her explanation with a sorrowful apology towards Miharu.

"That's okay, I'm here safe and sound now, thanks to Haruto." Miharu reflexively shook her head at having a princess bow to her, but she stiffened upon making eye contact with Rio.

For some reason, it seems as though Miharu keeps getting embarrassed whenever she looks at Haruto... But Haruto seems calm about it, Satsuki observed quietly, analyzing the situation.

"We laid out the plan and watched it proceed accordingly, but the only factor that exceeded our expectations was the extent of Sir Haruto's abilities. Seeing you retrieve Lady Miharu so easily was beyond anything we could have imagined. Honestly, it was a stunning upset." Charlotte looked at Rio with a mischievous smile.

"It seems I went and made things worse instead. I apologize." Rio solemnly bowed his head.

"No, no, not at all. You were able to retrieve Lady Miharu sooner that way, so it was for the best. And personally, my heart has never fluttered as much as the moment I saw you leap from the castle. You were incredible, Sir Haruto. If Father caught wind of it, I believe he'd hold you in an even higher regard," Charlotte said, gazing at Rio with more than

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just inquisitive heat. She proceeded to maintain fixed eye contact with him.

Rio looked a little uncomfortable with being stared at for so long. “…I am honored.”

“Hmm…” Satsuki stared at Rio’s side profile. Miharu was also watching his face closely. When he noticed both of their gazes, Rio smoothed over his expression awkwardly.

“Hehe. Now, allow me to lead you all to Father. I’m sure there are some things to discuss before Sir Takahisa arrives as well.” Charlotte smiled alluringly and turned around to begin walking, but immediately came to a stop and spun back. “Ah, but first—there’s something I should probably tell you beforehand, as you may want to prepare yourselves before discussing this with Father present.”

“What is it?” Satsuki looked at Charlotte and asked.

“It’s the reason why I wasn’t able to inform everyone of the situation in advance. I believed it may be quite an unsettling matter to hear.” Charlotte looked a little somber as she looked from Satsuki to Miharu before finally glancing at Rio.

“What do you mean…?” Satsuki stiffened faintly, exchanging looks with Miharu.

“Lady Aki proactively cooperated in the kidnapping of Lady Miharu.”

“Wha…”

The truth that Charlotte thrust at them was more than enough to leave them shaken.

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After that, Charlotte led Rio and the others into a meeting room of the Galarc castle reserved for royalty. They had been greatly bewildered by Aki’s cooperation in Miharu’s kidnapping, but decided to prioritize relocating to the room.

Waiting inside the room was King Francois and First

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Princess Lilianna.

“Lady Miharu…” Lilianna blinked at the sight of Miharu. She must have been surprised to see Miharu here after Takahisa had just caused an uproar.

Meanwhile, Francois sent his daughter Charlotte a questioning look. *What exactly happened? Explain the situation*, his eyes said.

Charlotte giggled at their reactions. “It may seem like an unforeseen circumstance has occurred, but there’s nothing to worry about. Sir Haruto simply flew into the sky and retrieved Lady Miharu himself,” she stated succinctly. Both Francois and Lilianna were taken aback by that, their surprise showing clear on their faces.

“…Flew into the sky, you say?”

In the Strahl region, the only means of flying were to board an enchanted ship or ride a flying mount. If Rio had flown under his own power, then it was indeed something to be taken aback by.

“That’s exactly what I said. Sir Haruto used the power of his enchanted sword to leap into the sky and board the ship that Sir Takahisa was on. It seems like Sir Takahisa was knocked out onboard the ship, so it should be easy to bring him back,” Charlotte said happily, looking at Rio.

Francois had been listening in a near-daze before he determined his daughter was telling the truth, then burst into hearty laughter. “…Ha! Hahaha! I see. It’s just one surprise after another with you, Haruto,” he said, looking at Rio.

“Thank you for your kind words.” Rio bowed his head in embarrassment.

“Now, how much have you told Satsuki and the others, Charlotte?”

“I’ve already given them the general gist of how we were moving in secrecy, but it seems like they’re still a bit shocked by it all and have yet to accept the situation completely.

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While it's easy to feel rage towards Sir Takahisa for directly committing the crime, there must be conflicted feelings towards Lady Aki for her secret involvement."

"Hmm. Well, that's understandable." Charlotte and Francois' gazes turned towards Satsuki and Miharu, who were beside Rio.

"Could you tell us more? I'd like to hear the details about why Takahisa and Aki decided to kidnap Miharu," Satsuki asked, holding her breath quietly.

Francois looked at Lilianna. "It would be best for Lilianna to answer that, as she was there. But have a seat first."

"Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu can sit over there. Sir Haruto, please come this way." Charlotte offered Satsuki and Miharu the empty seats of honor before softly entwining her arm around Rio's and pulling him to sit with her.

"Excuse me." Rio sat in the seat Charlotte offered to him. Miharu and Satsuki exchanged a meaningful look after seeing them before they took their own seats.

"Before you tell us, can I ask where Aki and Masato are right now?" Satsuki asked Francois.

"We took them into our care as soon as the commotion started. Right now we've left them in another room and told them that an unexpected situation has occurred."

"Got it. Please go on, then," Satsuki said, looking at Lilianna.

"Of course. I'll start with Sir Takahisa's motive behind this foolish act. As I'm sure you must know, Sir Takahisa has romantic feelings towards Lady Miharu," Lilianna said, looking at Miharu.

"Indeed," Satsuki nodded naturally. Meanwhile, Miharu was taken aback and looked slightly uncomfortable. Rio continued listening without any particular change in expression.

"That's why Sir Takahisa was overjoyed to be reunited with Lady Miharu. But, at the same time, he was flustered.

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He panicked at the thought of a man he didn't know getting close to Lady Miharu."

When he heard Lilianna's explanation, a distant look appeared in Rio's eyes. The situations were similar: in his previous life as Amakawa Haruto, he had spotted Miharu with Takahisa after entering high school. As a result, Amakawa Haruto had felt a strong sense of loss, but an even stronger feeling of panic.

"Knowing that Lady Miharu strongly favored Sir Amakawa and knowing what kind of person Sir Amakawa is, Sir Takahisa's panic gradually turned into a feeling of rivalry towards Sir Amakawa. Then, when Lady Miharu said she wanted to stay with Sir Amakawa, that rivalry transformed into undeniable jealousy."

In Takahisa's case, the panic of losing Miharu had changed into a sense of rivalry and envy instead.

"Envy can cloud a man's judgment. This was especially so in Sir Takahisa's case, as he tends to feel more strongly than other people. He can be immature and weak of heart, which was why he wasn't able to view his situation objectively. He couldn't accept reality, couldn't face his own weakness. Unable to suppress his jealousy, he challenged Sir Amakawa to a duel, but he couldn't give up on Lady Miharu despite his defeat… Resulting in the uproar over kidnapping Lady Miharu," Lilianna said, giving her own analysis about Takahisa's emotional state.

"…" Both Satsuki and Miharu fell silent with pained expressions.

"Sir Takahisa insisted that Lady Miharu would only be unhappy remaining with Sir Amakawa, so he sought a duel to pull them apart—but he actually just wanted Lady Miharu to remain by his side instead. He knew he would lose to Sir Amakawa before they even fought, but he was unwilling to accept that, and went on a childish tantrum like this instead…"

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Whether it was because she had been closest to him since he arrived in this world or because she had the observing eyes of royalty, Lilianna guessed at Takahisa's emotions accurately.

"I suppose I can understand that, if I *really* tried," Satsuki said sullenly.

"Even after being defeated by Sir Amakawa, Sir Takahisa couldn't accept the thought of being separated from Lady Miharu. Lady Aki and I followed him into the castle after he departed the arena, and it was there that he said he had thought of a plan to keep Lady Miharu away from Sir Amakawa."

"He really is a child..." The more Satsuki listened, the greater her anger was building.

"I proposed to Sir Takahisa that we returned to our kingdom. That he should put some distance between himself and Lady Miharu, in order to cool his head. But he immediately shot me down..." Lilianna said, smiling quite sadly. "Because I had emphasized the lack of options left for Sir Takahisa, he turned to the most destructive means he had left: to forcefully bring Lady Miharu to Centostella against her will..."

Lilianna had tried to direct the conversation towards how unfeasible that would be, but unfortunately, Takahisa was past the point of reasoning by then.

Satsuki was dumbfounded. "No way... He really just thought that would work?"

"...Yes. He insisted that Lady Miharu would understand once they talked it out afterwards. It was my irresponsible words that caused all of this. Please accept my sincerest apologies." Lilianna bowed her head, deeply regretful for her words.

"No, no one in their right mind would go ahead with that..." Satsuki defended Lilianna while feeling extremely exasperated. Miharu seemed to agree with her, as she was

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nodding along.

“However, the fact of the matter is that my words caused all this. I frantically tried to get Sir Takahisa to change his mind, but he wouldn’t listen to me at all. He said he would no longer return to Centostella if he couldn’t bring Lady Miharu with him, and that he would quit being a hero.”

“…” Satsuki fell speechless once again.

“If there is one thing that Princess Lilianna must prevent at all costs, it is the rebellion of the hero. For a kingdom that worships the Six Wise Gods, it would be a tragedy that could rock the land. It is a more than effective threat to make,” Francois added, joining the discussion after remaining silent up until that point.

“If Lady Satsuki rebelled against us, our kingdom would also be in a world of trouble,” Charlotte added with a giggle.

“I would never do such a thing when I’ve been given no reason to distrust our relationship,” Satsuki sighed, pressing her hand against her head.

Charlotte chose not to press the matter any further, instead turning to Lilianna with an unrelated question. “That aside, there was one thing I was wondering. Why does Sir Takahisa think that Lady Miharu would only be unhappy with Sir Haruto?”

“In the world that Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu originally came from, the act of killing another person is extremely frowned upon. This is apparently relevant here because, well… It seems that Sir Amakawa has a history of doing so…” Lilianna explained awkwardly, looking at Rio.

“Haruto is a wandering swordsman, so it would only be natural to kill bandits and the like in self-defense on his travels. The way Princess Lilianna puts it, this act sounds like it is condemned even in the case of legitimate self-defense. Is that so, Lady Satsuki?” Francois asked curiously.

“Well… The country we came from did consider it to be socially unacceptable, even if it were for legitimate self-

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defense," Satsuki answered a little bitterly.

"Our world can also deem the killing of an individual to be murder depending on the time and situation, so it appears the biggest difference is in the way they condemn what we consider acceptable by our laws and order," Francois hummed in interest. He then steered the conversation back to Lilianna. "I apologize for interrupting. Do continue with your story, Princess Lilianna."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lilianna resumed her explanation with a frown. "From the moment he started thinking of Lady Miharu's kidnapping as a realistic option, there was no way of changing Sir Takahisa's mind. I tried to persuade him, but to no avail, so I asked Lady Aki to assist in persuading him, but…"

"…What did Aki say to Takahisa?" Miharu asked nervously.

"She asked if it wasn't enough for her to be there instead of Lady Miharu."

"…And what was Takahisa's answer?" Satsuki asked this time.

Lilianna slowly shook her head. "Nothing in words. But it was the same as answering no, as that was when Lady Aki appeared—broken—as she offered to assist Sir Takahisa…"

"I… see…" Both Satsuki and Miharu looked to be in anguish.

"There was nothing more I could do after that. Because I had strongly opposed Sir Takahisa's plans, he seemed to be a little wary of me, which caused tension between us…" Lilianna said vaguely, frowning.

"So you ended up cooperating with Takahisa?" Satsuki guessed.

"Yes. But only on the surface. At that point, I had given up on resolving this alone. I conceded my allegiance to Sir Takahisa then went behind his back to seek assistance from King Francois in resolving the situation." She probably

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hadn't wanted to betray Takahisa like this, as Lilianna's expression showed glimpses of guilt.

"Lady Miharu, Lady Satsuki, and Haruto. I apologize for not being able to inform you of the situation in advance." A king should never lower his head so easily, but at that moment, Francois bowed his head in a solemn apology.

"No, if anything, it's my responsibility that things turned out like this… I'm very sorry for all the trouble I've caused everyone." Miharu bowed her head in return, regretful of her own lack of action in confronting Aki. If only she hadn't feared their relationship turning sour, if only she hadn't passively remained beside Aki while ignoring the issue she had carried for many years…

At that, Satsuki spoke up with a conflicted expression. "I also believe this was the best way for things to be handled, so if Miharu accepts it, then I have nothing more to add," she said. While she had some objections to how the countermeasures that were planned had turned a blind eye to Miharu's momentary kidnapping, she didn't think she would have come up with a better solution if she were in Francois' position. Speaking up would only worsen the situation into what Francois and Charlotte had feared.

"As long as the two of them are in agreement, I have no objections, either," Rio added, the final one of them to speak.

"I see… That only leaves the matter of how to deal with Sir Takahisa and Lady Aki, then. On behalf of our kingdom, I would like to respect Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu's opinions first and foremost…" Francois finally touched upon the topic of how to deal with Takahisa and Aki and looked towards Satsuki and Miharu as the two people who came from the same hometown as the culprits.

"Even if you ask us, Takahisa's still a hero of the Centostella Kingdom, so there's no way for us to give an opinion without hearing Princess Lilianna's thoughts first…"

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Satsuki replied, passing the question on to Lilianna.

"My kingdom will not treat Sir Takahisa as a criminal, but I do intend on enforcing some kind of punishment. I would like to come to an agreement on what that penalty involves," Lilianna said firmly.

"What kind of penalty were you thinking of?" Satsuki asked.

"When I offered to cooperate in Lady Miharu's kidnapping, I made Sir Takahisa sign a contract with me. He agreed to accept whatever punishment I decide on if he were to fail at the kidnapping attempt. There were several items detailed which I shall show you later, but if you have any requests then I am prepared to apply that penalty on Sir Takahisa," Lilianna said fluently.

"I see… I don't think we'd be able to say anything for certain without seeing that contract, but…" Satsuki turned to Miharu. "What do you think?"

Miharu's face twisted in pain. "I… Instead of a punishment—and I don't know if the current Takahisa will be capable of doing this—I'd like the two of them to think carefully about what they did wrong and apologize to everyone they've hurt, including Haruto."

Lilianna watched Miharu closely before opening her mouth with a slightly downcast look in her eyes. "Of course, if he sincerely wants to apologize, then that would be for the best, but as Lady Miharu said, it may not be possible for him to do that, with the way he is now. I believe the best penalty would be to show him that a simple apology won't be enough to gain forgiveness. I don't intend to forgive him so easily for this incident, either." She wouldn't just sweep it under the rug. There was a quiet fury to Lilianna's words as she implied that.

"Indeed, it wouldn't benefit him to be forgiven so easily. I completely agree. What do you think, Haruto?" Satsuki asked.

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“I… am worried about how Aki will be treated for cooperating with Takahisa,” Rio said.

“I am prepared to bring her to my kingdom as originally planned, if she still wishes to do so. But I don’t have any particular punishment in mind, so if Lady Miharu and Lady Satsuki have any requests, then I shall arrange to fulfill them.” Just like with Takahisa’s case, Lilianna sought Miharu and Satsuki’s opinions for how to handle Aki.

“I don’t believe Aki should be forgiven so easily, either. I’m sure Miharu will want to forgive Aki as soon as she sees her in pain, but that would be the biggest punishment and best for her own sake. That’s why I think it would be better for Miharu and Haruto to avoid seeing her for a while. What do you think?” After giving her opinion on the matter, Satsuki looked at Miharu first.

Miharu pondered the reason why Aki would want to cooperate with Takahisa and found her own feelings wanting to remain by Aki’s side, so she forced those feelings down and nodded. “That’s… Yeah. That may be for the best.”

It wouldn’t help Aki if Miharu continued to interact with her as she had until now. It would only cause the same thing to happen again.

“What about you, Haruto?” Satsuki inquired.

Rio had hesitated for a moment, but soon nodded. “…I have no objections. Does that mean that even if Aki states she wants to follow Miharu instead, she’d be made to stay with Takahisa? Is that correct?”

“If that happens, I’ll watch over Aki instead, in which case I’ll have to ask for the Galarc Kingdom’s cooperation to allow her to stay here. Is that all right, King Francois?” Satsuki asked.

“Of course. We were prepared to welcome your friends from the beginning,” Francois nodded easily.

“Thank you very much,” Satsuki bowed her head. Miharu followed her lead. Just then, someone knocked on the door

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of the meeting room.

“Who is it?” Francois replied, but Charlotte stood up from her seat. They had ordered everyone else to leave, so there was no one else available to answer the door. Considering their positions, Rio couldn’t let a princess superior to him handle the errands, so he also stood up to accompany her.

“I’ll get the door.”

“Oh my, it’s like I’ve gained my own personal guard. How delightful.” Rio took the lead and opened the door, to Charlotte’s joy. On the other side of the door stood a knight different to the ones standing on guard.

“The hero of the Centostella Kingdom has been brought to the castle. Shall I escort him here?” he reported, placing his right hand over his chest in a show of respect.

“How is he acting? Any signs of struggling?” Francois asked from where he was seated.

“None, Your Majesty. He does seem a little sullen, but is maintaining his silence.”

“I see. In that case, let him wait in the room next door.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The knight bowed his head respectfully before departing. Rio quietly closed the door behind him.

“Now, let us return, Sir Haruto.” Charlotte pressed up close against Rio as they returned to their seats.

“What would you like to do? I have no reason to meet with Sir Takahisa before anyone else here,” Francois asked, looking at Satsuki and Lilianna.

“I’d like to talk to Takahisa and Aki alone for a bit. On behalf of Miharu and Haruto, that is,” Satsuki requested.

“In that case, Lady Aki shall be brought to the next room, too. Princess Lilianna, if you have anything to discuss with Sir Takahisa, you may head next door first,” said Francois.

“No, it would be easier for me to speak with both Sir Takahisa and Lady Aki present, so I shall wait for Lady Aki to arrive. I can do so after Lady Satsuki speaks with them

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first," Lilianna decided.

"In that case, would you like to sit in, too, Princess Lilianna? We can discuss everything at once that way," Satsuki asked, extending a request for Lilianna to join her.

"I understand. Let's go with that, then." Lilianna nodded solemnly.

"Thank you. Miharu and Haruto, could you go call Masato and explain things to him, then?" With Satsuki handling Takahisa and Aki, she entrusted Masato to Miharu and Rio.

"...Yes, leave it to us." A shadow fell over Miharu's face as she nodded hesitantly. She had realized that now was not the time to meet the two of them.

"Then I shall send a summons for Lady Aki and Sir Masato. Lady Aki will be led to the meeting room next door, and Sir Masato will be brought to this room," said Francois.

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Aki and Masato's arrival was announced ten minutes later. Satsuki and Lilianna headed out while Masato took their place in the room with Rio and Miharu.

"Haruto, Miharu—what on earth happened? Aki looked like a ghost the entire time before they led her to another room." Masato had bumped into Satsuki while they were swapping rooms and was told to ask Rio and Miharu for the details, leaving him confused from the moment he entered the room.

"We'll explain everything. Have a seat first," Rio said to Masato as calmly as possible.

Francois, who was still present in the meeting room, stood up. "Hmm. Then Charlotte and I shall leave this to you, Haruto."

"Thank you for your consideration, Your Majesty."

Rio immediately stood up and bowed his head at Francois, his right hand over his heart. Miharu hurried to

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stand up and bow her head with Rio.

“It’s fine. I shall have Charlotte tell me of your heroic feats earlier. Let’s go.” Francois smiled happily and left the room with Charlotte, leaving Rio, Miharu, and Masato alone in the room.

“How about you have a seat over here, Masato?” Miharu suggested Masato take the seat she had been in and moved to sit beside Rio.

“Sure…” Masato sat down across from Rio and Miharu, watching their expressions carefully.

“So, umm. This may come as a surprise to you, but…” Miharu began hesitantly.

“Miharu, I can do the explaining,” Rio offered. He thought it cruel for Miharu to have to speak about it, as she was the victim in the situation.

“W-What is it…?” Masato could feel the unusual mood in the air and stiffened cautiously.

“I’m sure it’ll be a shock to hear this, so I’ll say it as simply as possible. Takahisa made an unsuccessful attempt to kidnap Miharu. Aki cooperated with him,” Rio said curtly.

“…Wha?”

Sure enough, Masato froze in shock.

“Takahisa and Aki summoned us to that garden under the guise of saying farewell, when they actually intended to kidnap Miharu. After everyone split up and Miharu was left with Takahisa, he abducted her. Now, Satsuki and Princess Lilianna are talking to the two of them next door.”

“…Are you serious?” Masato muttered in a daze.

“Yes, I’m serious. Some people in the castle spotted them and made a commotion, and Princess Lilianna herself testified as soon as she learned of their plans. Not to mention I was the one who retrieved Miharu from the enchanted ship,” Rio said, listing the facts in a stiff voice.

“Argh… Damn it, what are those two doing…” Masato muttered, his face scrunched up on the verge of tears.

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“Masato…” Miharu bit down on her lip.

“Sorry, Miharu. For my brother and sister…” Masato apologized to Miharu as though it was his own mistake.

“Don’t apologize, Masato. I was at fault, too. Even though I was the closest one to Aki, I continuously ignored the problem she carried in her heart…” Miharu said with an agonized expression, feeling guilt in her heart.

“While I can’t say for sure that your thoughts are wrong, don’t you think they’re a little off the mark? The ones who should bear the burden of the crime are the criminals alone. Even bearing a part of the burden for someone who committed a crime won’t be of benefit to them. That’s why it’s not either of your faults. Of course, I have no intention of denying how important the two of them are to you, but if you don’t detach yourselves, you’ll just be contributing to a vicious cycle,” Rio said logically.

“But… What should I do, then…?” Masato whispered, his voice barely audible. Rio’s words seemed to have reached his heart, but he still felt clueless.

“What matters is what you *want* to do, not what you should do. Think about what you want to do, then reverse calculate what you can do about it. Reality may not work out that smoothly, as you may have many things you want to do and some of them may contradict with each other… Why don’t you give it some thought? Take some time to come to grips with the truth first, then think about it.” A faint shadow was cast over Rio’s face as he advised Masato in a gentle voice.

“Haruto…” Masato murmured. He was deeply touched.

“At the very least, I don’t think any of the blame should fall on you, Masato. The same goes for Miharu. You don’t believe Miharu’s at fault, either. Right, Masato?”

“Y-Yeah! Of course not!”

“In that case, stop blaming yourself. You can start there.”

“All right…” Masato nodded his head obediently.

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“You, too.” Rio looked at Miharu beside him.

“O-Okay.” Miharu was so absorbed in Rio’s words, she flinched when she was suddenly addressed.

“Please don’t take on more responsibility than you need to. If you really treasure the two of them, instead of bearing the weight of their crimes, become their support, even if that means you need to be harsh and push them away. That’s why it would be better to stay away from them for a while, don’t you think?”

“…Yes, that’s right.”

“So please stop blaming yourself. That’s all I wanted to say,” Rio said in conclusion, shrugging his shoulders with a sigh.

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...Haruto is so mature.

It was only natural, considering he had lived in Japan up until he was a university student before adding on his years living here, but Miharu felt that even more strongly after hearing his words. What was she like in comparison? It would be a stretch to say she could stand by his side equally.

She was still a child, after all... While Miharu could tell how reliable Rio was, at the same time, she was frustrated with her own immaturity.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, a bit earlier—

"We're coming in." Satsuki entered the meeting room where Takahisa and Aki were waiting. Lilianna followed behind her.

"S-Satsuki... and Lily..." Takahisa averted his eyes with an awfully guilt-ridden face. There was no way he could meet their eyes directly.

"..."

Aki was as pale as a sheet, shrinking back in her seat.

Satsuki sighed. "I'm sure you know the meaning of why the two of you were brought here, right? Not only the perpetrator, but Aki, too," she said while standing.

"Ah, that's..." Aki flinched, looking at Lilianna standing behind Satsuki.

Satsuki followed her gaze and felt anger and exasperation surge within her. "Just what were the two of you trying to accomplish?" she asked clearly.

"..."

Neither of them answered. Takahisa was glaring into the distance with a bitter expression while Aki's eyes were heavily tinted with guilt as they darted about the place.

"Judging from her reaction, Aki's finally realized the scale of the irremediable mess that was made, it seems? Takahisa

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still seems to be discontent about the current situation."

"...Did Lily tell you everything?" Takahisa asked sullenly.

"You forced Princess Lilianna to cooperate under certain conditions, so obviously. The hero of her kingdom was about to cause an uproar in a foreign kingdom. That's an international problem, you realize? She worked desperately to secure as favorable a position as possible for the two of you and the kingdom as soon as she found out. And yet, what's with your attitude right now, Takahisa? Do you even understand that you took advantage of Miharu and caused trouble for so many people because of your own selfishness?" Satsuki snapped after seeing Takahisa's attitude.

"..." Takahisa bit down on his lip bitterly.

"On top of that, you even dragged Aki into it just because she said she'd cooperate... If you're her brother, shouldn't you be the one to stop her?"

"..." Takahisa fell silent with a sullen face. Aki watched him getting scolded with a sidelong glance before looking even more gloomy herself.

"Is that a look to say you don't even feel the slightest hint of remorse? Or is it a look to say you don't want to accept your faults?"

"It's neither..." Takahisa answered sulkily.

"I see. Enough of this, then. It seems like you don't want to listen, so I'll just start with the conclusion." Satsuki sighed deeply. "What you two did was a crime. It's not something that can be easily forgiven. If it were, it wouldn't be of any help to either of you. That's why Haruto, Miharu, and I discussed things and decided that you won't just get off the hook. The two of them are explaining the situation to Masato now, but we've decided it would be better for them to avoid seeing you for awhile. I won't let the two of you meet them right now."

They wouldn't be forgiven easily. They wouldn't even be

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allowed to see Miharu or Rio. Hearing Satsuki's firm words made Aki turn even paler. "Ah…"

"But even if what we did was a crime, that man—he's an undeniable criminal, too! And a murderer to boot! And yet…!" The violent emotions swirling in Takahisa's chest burst forth, making him spit out his words with a desperate expression.

"…That's irrelevant. No, that's pathetic." Satsuki's resentful face immediately turned into a look of pity.

"Pathetic?" Takahisa stared at Satsuki, as if to challenge her.

"Because it is, isn't it? You're using the fact that Haruto's killed before as a means to an end. You simply can't accept the fact that Miharu is in love with someone other than you. That's why you went crazy with jealousy and committed a crime. There was an easy part of Haruto you could criticize, so you're clinging to it to drag him down with you. If that isn't pathetic, then what is it?" Satsuki said plainly.

"W-Wha…" Takahisa was rendered speechless. He tried to argue back, but no words would come out. His rage and shame muddled together until his vision grew dark.

"You couldn't become the one Miharu loved. Haruto was the one chosen. That had been decided from the beginning. Did you think if you dragged him down, that you'd be moved up, instead?" Satsuki asked, stirring Takahisa up in order to reveal his ugly inner self.

"T-That's not true! If only—If only Miharu had been summoned with me instead…!"

"Even if Miharu had been summoned with you, she wouldn't have fallen in love with you. As long as you refuse to accept that, your relationship with us won't progress any more than this. I don't want to believe it, but I do," Satsuki said, a dark shadow falling over her face. She then turned to Aki and pouted her shapely lips. "You're not going to be a child forever, either, Aki, so it's time to act more grown up.

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Were you going to whine like a baby and tie Miharu to you forever?”

“I-I just… I just…” Aki whispered in a barely audible voice. She had just wanted to take back the relationship they had before. But before she knew it, that relationship had crumbled by her own hands.

“That goes for Haruto, too. You need to face him properly and tell him what you want. That’s why I asked him during our match yesterday—I asked him to face you two without holding back, otherwise we can’t move forward. That’s why he went to visit you last night by himself, yet you two went and tried to kidnap Miharu…” Satsuki grimaced in sadness, emotions filling her chest.

“…” Aki couldn’t say anything. Unable to look directly at Satsuki, she lowered her gaze and paled in guilt.

“Aki, you might consider Haruto to be heartless, but who’s the heartless one now? You two trampled all over Miharu’s feelings in order to fulfill your spoiled demands, using despicable means to return Haruto’s favor with something so awful.”

“…”

“You’ve created such a big incident that you won’t be treated as a child any longer. Don’t think that remaining silent will make Miharu move on your behalf and extend her hand to you. Think for yourself about what you should be doing from now on.”

If she really wanted to be forgiven, then she should reflect on her actions before apologizing sincerely to Miharu and Haruto. Satsuki wanted to add that, but didn’t. She wanted Aki to think about whether she wanted to be forgiven herself.

“Uhm…” Aki hung her head as tears filled her eyes. She clenched her fists.

“My apologies for the rant, Princess Lilianna. If you have anything to add, please, go ahead.” Satsuki sighed and

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handed the conversation to Lilianna after seeing Aki fall silent.

“Lady Satsuki has said everything needed to be said at present, but I shall add a little,” Lilianna began. Her words came out fluently, as though memorized. “Sir Takahisa. I told you there was no chance of success beforehand. You must know what happens now without me saying it out loud, no?”

“…Return to Centostella and accept my punishment while playing the hero, yeah,” Takahisa said, sulking.

“Yes. We’ll be leaving within a few days at the latest. Lady Aki, you will also be coming to our kingdom, so please be prepared to leave at any moment.”

“…Ah, r-right.” Aki flinched and replied in a stammer. She couldn’t tell whether the several days until departure would feel long or short.

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At this rate, she'd be separated from the people she cared about without a chance to speak to them properly. The realization suddenly rose within her and filled her with fear. At times like this, she had always relied on Miharu, and yet—

"Of course, neither Miharu nor Haruto will come see you off. I'll listen first if there's anything you have to say, so summon me before you leave."

"Uhm…" Aki felt like she had fallen from a cliff. Miharu would no longer reach out to her. She wouldn't even meet her.

How awful of Miharu… was what she didn't think. The awful one was her. She had charged forward without thinking, and lost everything in the end.

Aki calmed down to an almost eerie degree, her mind going entirely blank. She had no idea what to do, and tears started streaming from her eyes. "M-Mmm… wah…"

"…I'll be going now." Satsuki's expression turned stern at Aki's crying. She bit her lip and steeled herself, before turning away.

"Then I shall lead the two of them to their rooms. Go ahead and leave first, Lady Satsuki. I shall come talk to you again later," Lilianna said, encouraging Satsuki to leave before she stood up herself and approached Aki.

"Excuse me." Satsuki bowed at Lilianna before opening the door to leave the room. But—

"Masato."

It seemed like he had been waiting for them to finish, as he was standing outside with the guards.

"I wanted to talk to the two of them. Can I go inside? Haruto and Miharu have both agreed already," Masato asked, his expression a conflicted mix of many emotions.

"Sure, go ahead." Satsuki pushed open the door she hadn't completely closed yet. Takahisa and Aki were Masato's siblings—if he wished to meet them, then there was no reason to stop him from doing so.

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“Thank you. Haruto and Miharu are still next door,” Masato said before going inside, allowing Satsuki to close the door.

“…Guess I’ll go back to the two of them, then.”

Satsuki sighed deeply and headed for the meeting room with Rio and Miharu.

◇ ◇ ◇

What matters is what you want *to do, not what you should do. Think about what you want to do, then reverse calculate what you can do about it.*

After Rio had said that, the first thing that came to Masato’s mind was extremely simple.

“I want to talk to Takahisa and Aki.”

After telling Rio and Miharu his feelings, he headed for his siblings’ room. Thus, the first thing Masato saw after swapping places with Satsuki was the sight of his brother making a surly, sullen face while Aki cried beside him, Lilianna patting her back reassuringly.

“What is this…?” Masato muttered, a bitter grimace on his face. It was such a pathetic and shameful sight, he couldn’t help but feel apologetic towards everyone who looked after them since they came to this world.

“Sir Masato… Lady Aki doesn’t seem to be feeling well, so I was thinking of taking her to the rooms once she calms down…”

Aki was crying too hard to talk, and Takahisa was in a mood. Masato had wanted to give them a piece of his mind before hearing their explanation, but now his words wouldn’t come out. His siblings were just so pathetic to see…

It was clear that Lilianna had the short end of the stick in this situation. Takahisa was the hero of her country, so she couldn’t abandon him no matter what. This meant that she had to clean up his mess for him. As his younger brother,

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Masato felt incredibly apologetic about the situation.

“…I’m sorry. I’ll take Aki to the room. Could you handle my brother?” Masato bowed his head at Lilianna and approached Aki.

“Hic! Uuh…”

“Come on, stand up, Aki,” Masato said bluntly to the weeping Aki. He pulled her by the arm and she staggered to her feet.

“If you were going to just cry about it, then you shouldn’t have done this in the first place…” he muttered helplessly.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, in the king’s office, Francois and Charlotte were having a one-on-one discussion. The topic was, of course, Rio. To be more precise, Charlotte had just finished reporting the events that had taken place when Rio rescued Miharu.

“Thus, I believe that Sir Haruto should be received with as much hospitality as Lady Satsuki in order to form a most favorable relationship with him.”

“It was a rather passionate report coming from you. Just what caused this change?” Francois asked with a chuckle.

“It’s only natural to be passionate about this. He flew into the air without a mount and boarded the enchanted ship alone to rescue a hostage, you know? I’m certain now that the tale of the demi-dragon’s breath was not merely a rumor. Do we have anyone in this kingdom that could achieve the same feats as Sir Haruto? We don’t have any heroic figures like the King’s Sword in the Beltrum Kingdom, so I’m sure you can understand Sir Haruto’s value, Father.”

“I’m more than aware of Haruto’s value, but… Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for him?”

“Yes, I do believe I have,” Charlotte nodded gracefully without a moment of hesitation.

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"…" Francois' eyes widened in a show of rare surprise. He made a dubious face, as though questioning her sincerity.

"Why, there's no need to be so clear in your surprise. I've never fallen in love before, so I'm not too familiar with it, but I'm still a young maiden myself. Yes, I do believe this is love. When I think of Sir Haruto, my heart can't help but beat faster. I can feel my desire for him." Charlotte puffed up her cheeks cutely as she spilled her feelings to her father.

"Sorry. I thought you were a villainess who only felt joy in attracting men to make them dance in the palm of your hand while watching relationships break down. I can't help my surprise." Instead of an apology, the words Francois said about his own daughter were unbelievably harsh.

"While it's true I feel joy in such things, this time I felt my heart flutter like never before at a gentleman. It filled me with the impulse to make that gentleman mine one day." Charlotte showed no offense as she gave a coquettish smile of delight.

"…Even for my daughter, you're a twisted one," Francois sighed tiredly with his right hand pressed against his head.

"Oh? Was it not you who raised me in such an environment?" Charlotte stared at her father with a mischievous giggle.

"And? What is your aim in telling me this?"

"One reason is because you would see through me anyway, so I wanted to inform you myself ahead of time. Another reason is because the nobles of our kingdom will surely come knocking with offers of marriage for Sir Haruto soon, so I'd like to ask you to use your power to suppress them. And, finally, I'd like to ask that you present me as a candidate instead."

"…Even if he is an honorary knight, did you think it would be that easy to approve of his marriage to royalty?"

"Oh? But Father, weren't you thinking of tying Lady Satsuki and Sir Haruto together at one point?"

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“What makes you think that?”

“Because, Father, you’re always quick to get to the point, yet you skipped over my request for you to suppress offers from nobility to discuss this first. Meaning you intended on doing so from the beginning even without my request, no? And why would that be? Lady Satsuki—”

“Enough. Good grief, having a daughter with too much intelligence is another problem in itself,” Francois lamented, waving his hand in annoyance.

“Hehe. You didn’t even try to hide it.” Charlotte’s gentle smile didn’t waver. Even against her own father, she calmly maintained her sly, fox-like demeanor. If she didn’t, Francois wouldn’t appoint her any responsibility.

“But it is true that the marriage of royalty cannot be easily approved. Considering how the hero isn’t bound by such customs and is a supernatural existence herself, wouldn’t the possibilities be higher for her?”

“I don’t believe that will be an issue. If he continues to build his relationship with our kingdom, it is only a matter of time before Sir Haruto achieves even greater military exploits. Those hard-headed nobles bound by tradition will have to give in.”

“Do you have any foundation for that confidence of yours?”

“Yes. My eye for men is my foundation.”

“Heh…” Francois chuckled in amusement.

“Even if Lady Satsuki were to marry Sir Haruto first, I’d simply aim for the position of second wife, I suppose. It would be safe to assume my clear rivals at this time are Lady Miharu, and perhaps Liselotte, too. Well, the bigger problem is the fact Sir Haruto doesn’t seem to have any interest in tying the knot with someone at present…” Charlotte started to monologue, her eyes sparkling with thoughts of the future.

Scheming and predictions aside, I never imagined this

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girl could show so much interest in a single man…

There was no knowing what could happen in this world. That thought alone made it difficult to completely dismiss Charlotte's map of the future as unrealistic.

Francois watched his unexpectedly passionate daughter with vacant eyes as he considered the future of the Galarc Kingdom.

◇ ◇ ◇

After Satsuki swapped places with Masato and left Aki and Takahisa, she returned to the room where Rio and Miharu were. She informed them of what she told Takahisa and Aki and how they had reacted, before discussing various things about the incident.

"…Can I ask you a question, Haruto?" Miharu nervously looked at Rio seated beside her.

Rio nodded immediately. "Yes, of course."

"Umm, what did Takahisa say to you to make you accept that duel?" Miharu asked.

Rio looked at the ceiling and thought for a bit. "…He asked me to reject you if he won. But I intended on facing him no matter what he said, so what he said had no relevance to my accepting the duel," he answered while looking at Satsuki.

"Before we had our match, I asked something of Haruto. I told him there were things that couldn't be conveyed without facing them head-on, and I asked him to face Takahisa and Aki. But that resulted in this current situation, so this was all because of me. I'm sorry…" Satsuki apologized, biting her lip.

"Don't be silly." Rio sounded a little exasperated.

"Huh…?"

"There were things I only understood because we clashed there. Because we disagreed with each other so much, our

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problem couldn't be solved in a single match, making that discontent explode. That feeling was conveyed properly. Am I wrong?"

Satsuki blinked at Rio sitting opposite her. "...No, you're not."

"If so, it was better to butt heads than to continue carrying that latent problem without moving forward. Well, I'm not one to talk, after avoiding Miharu until Satsuki had to make her request of me," Rio said, laughing at himself slightly. "We said the same to Masato, but you can just think about what you want to do from here. If you think it's salvageable, you can give them some time to cool their heads before facing them again until you're satisfied. Optimism suits you better than pessimism, after all," he added with an amused chuckle.

"Wh... What? You're suddenly all calm and composed like an adult. Speaking as though you know me," Satsuki pouted, blushing in embarrassment.

"Really?" Rio cocked his head curiously.

"Really. Right, Miharu?" Satsuki said, seeking Miharu's agreement.

"Yes. For some reason, it feels like the air around you has gotten softer... I think."

Miharu glanced at Rio's side profile. But the moment Rio looked back and met her eyes, she flushed and looked away.

"...Hey, did something happen between the two of you?" Satsuki stared at Rio and asked.

"Why are you asking me?" Rio asked back with a frown.

"Because she's like this." Satsuki gave the still-blushing Miharu a pointed look.

"Nothing in particular. I just asked her to get along with me from here on out. Not specifically as Amakawa Haruto, but..."

"Hmm..."

It wasn't clear whether Satsuki was convinced or not as

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she stared closely at Rio and Miharu's faces. *It seems like I'll have to corner Miharu when she's alone and ask for more details.*

Miharu had a bad feeling and looked away from Satsuki. Just then, someone knocked on the door.

"Ah, is that Masato?"

Miharu stood up first to open the door. Masato was standing beyond it, but his expression was dark. It was actually a very serious expression.

"Umm, I have something to say," he said, looking at Miharu standing before him.

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Chapter 2: Masato's Decision

"I have something to say," Masato said quietly.

"...Right, okay. Come in, Masato." Miharu could tell Masato had something important to say from the look on his face and invited him inside with a gentle tone. Masato nodded before following Miharu into the room.

"Come—sit down."

"Okay."

Satsuki had encouraged Masato to take the seat next to hers. Miharu returned to her original place beside Rio so that the four of them were seated facing each other in pairs.

"You want to talk about Takahisa and Aki, right?" Satsuki asked, looking at Masato.

"Yeah. Neither of them were in a state to hold a conversation, so I just sent them to their rooms with Princess Lilianna and came back..."

"Did something happen?"

"No, nothing in particular happened, but..." Masato looked down and frowned in frustration. He paused before lifting his head. "The two of them will be taken to the Centostella Kingdom soon, right?" he asked nervously.

"Yes, most likely. Takahisa is the hero of Centostella, so Princess Lilianna has no choice but to take him back to her kingdom, otherwise she'd be in trouble. If Aki chooses to stay... I can ask the king if she can live with me in this castle for a while," Satsuki said.

"I see... That's right..." A shadow fell over Masato's face.

Satsuki exchanged glances with Rio and Miharu. "Would you prefer if they didn't go to Centostella?"

"No, that wouldn't be right. They may have done

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something incredibly stupid, but even that stupid brother of mine is needed by the Centostella Kingdom—I know this well, because Haruto's said it many times now. I agree with the three of you… I can't forgive them so easily, either. If they remain around Miharu and Haruto without even reflecting on their actions, I'm worried they'll try something again in the future. That's why I know it's best to keep them distant. But still, even then…" Masato trailed off, wondering if it was right to say what he was about to say. He seemed at a terrible loss for words.

"Don't hold back—just say what you're thinking. No one will dismiss you without listening first," Rio urged.

"…Even then, those two stupid siblings are my siblings. Seeing Aki sobbing and Takahisa sulking when it was all his fault to begin with made me feel really pathetic as their brother. I can't just sit still and watch Princess Lilianna take care of the two of them. Why should someone else have to clean up after my fallen family? Honestly, I don't want to stay with them, but I feel like I have to." Masato spat out the mixed feelings he had swirling in his chest and clenched his teeth.

"Masato…" Miharu and Satsuki were both speechless, their faces gloomy.

"…I see. So what do you want to do, Masato?" Rio asked calmly so that he wouldn't frighten him.

"I want to follow the two of them to Centostella and help them get their lives back on track, I think. I do have doubts as to whether making such a sudden change of mind would benefit them or not, so I don't know if this is the right decision, but…"

He had gone as far as arguing with his brother to follow his original decision of staying with Rio, but now he was making the complete opposite choice. Masato was terribly anxious about choosing which path he needed to go down.

"Those two are connected to everyone here in a similar

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but vastly different way. Our situations are completely different. It's obvious that decisions will vary on an individual level, and what is right or not will vary too—if anything, it's more common to be unsure of what's right. There's no guarantee that what you want to do will be what's right. Honestly, you should just value your own will and do what you won't regret later. As long as you don't tread down a clearly dangerous path, we'll support your decision. If you want us to give you our opinion, just say the word," Rio said, advising Masato as his elder.

"Then can you tell me what you guys think about this…?" Masato asked with an imploring look.

"I don't think either option is wrong. You're the only one here who is both their family and an outsider to the incident. It isn't unnatural for you to feel like you should do something about this, and you won't be a bad influence just by being near them, unlike Miharu and I," said Rio.

His point was about how Miharu was certainly a sister-like presence to Aki, but she had been the victim of this incident and a huge part of the motive behind the crime. It was easy to reach the conclusion that she shouldn't be near her.

"I'm in general agreement with Haruto. However, Takahisa won't be able to look after you and Aki the way he is right now, so you should consider yourself as well. I can't leave the Galarc Kingdom and you won't have Haruto or Miharu with you. You'll have to be more responsible for yourself than ever before." Satsuki agreed with Rio, but worried for Masato.

Masato nodded. "Yeah, I know that."

"…" Meanwhile, Miharu had her mouth shut as she watched on with a worried look.

"Are you wondering if it'd be better for you to go, too, Miharu?" Satsuki asked.

"…No, I still feel like I need to stay away from the two of

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them.” Miharu shook her head slowly. Her heart felt heavy whenever she thought of Aki, but doing what Aki wanted would just be spoiling her again. Doing nothing was the best thing Miharu could do for Aki right now.

“I see…” Satsuki looked troubled, but, at the same time, a little pleased.

“Well, there’s no need for you to have an answer right now. You can use all of the remaining time until those two depart for Centostella. You haven’t told Princess Lilianna yet, either, right?” Rio said to Masato to help him relax.

“Yeah. I was still conflicted about this after I escorted them to their rooms… But I feel a little better after talking to you guys. Thanks.” Masato chuckled like his usual self.

“Hehe, I’m relieved to see you smile like that. It’s a tough time for all of us, but that’s why we have to stay positive. Being gloomy will only make you feel gloomy too,” Satsuki said with a gentle smile.

“Yeah. If anything, I’d like to show Takahisa and Aki that we’re all able to laugh happily. That would have a greater effect on those two.” Masato snickered wickedly.

“Hehe.” Miharu and Rio both chuckled.

“That aside, Haruto—I have a separate request to make…” Masato suddenly said.

“What is it?”

“Could you bring me to the stone house tonight? The others might leave from the kingdom as early as tomorrow, and I’d like to see everyone before then. This could be goodbye for now, and I want to tell them about Aki, as well…”

He worded it as a possibility, but Masato had probably made his decision already. His grinning face looked a tiny bit sorrowful.

Rio pretended he didn’t see it and nodded with a slightly troubled look. “…Yeah, sure.”

Miharu and Satsuki both seemed to notice as well, but

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chose to watch their conversation instead of speaking up.

“Ah, I don’t like depressing moods. After we’re done talking to everyone, let’s take a bath together. I’ll wash your back for you,” Masato said to Rio to clear the heavy atmosphere hanging over them.

“Sure, let’s do it.”

“Yeah,” Masato replied happily.

“Hmm, a bath. That sounds nice… Right, Miharu?” Satsuki joined in the conversation with a playfully interested tone, as though she was responding to Masato’s request for a less depressing mood.

“Yes. I’d like one, too,” Miharu nodded with a giggle.

Rio thought for a moment. “…Then shall we all head to the stone house?” he suggested.

“Huh? But shouldn’t I stay here on guard…?” She had said it pretty much half-jokingly, so Satsuki was a little shocked that permission was given so easily.

“The security around the castle hasn’t eased after the attack on the banquet, but there’s nothing we can do about that. We need this for a refresher, like Masato said. Instead, we can come back a little earlier. Of course, if you’re still worried, you can stay back…” Rio said, giving Satsuki the option to choose.

“Guh… I’m going!”

Satsuki was conflicted for a moment before losing to the temptations of the bath in the stone house. Unable to pass up the opportunity, it was decided that the four of them would head to the stone house that night.

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That night, after everyone would have fallen asleep, Rio and the others departed from Satsuki’s balcony in the pitch-black darkness to head to the stone house.

They moved with the usual help from Aishia, Rio carrying

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Satsuki in a bridal carry with Masato on his back while Aishia carried Miharu. They left the capital and arrived at the stone house in no time at all. Aishia had warned everyone in advance, so Celia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were all waiting outside.

“Welcome back!” Latifa took the lead in energetically welcoming their return. When she noticed Masato was there and Aki wasn’t, she made a slightly confused face.

“And welcome, Satsuki,” Latifa said to Satsuki in a friendly tone.

“Hi, Latifa—I’ll be intruding for a short while. Good evening, everyone,” Satsuki returned their greetings with a graceful smile.

“Good evening,” Celia and the others replied warmly. “There’s no point in standing around, so let’s go inside.”

Once they arrived in the living room…

“There are several things we’d like to tell everyone today, and it has to do with why Aki isn’t here. Shall we have a seat first?” Rio began, encouraging them to sit down.

Aishia had informed them that Rio and the others were coming, but hadn’t mentioned why, so Celia and the others stiffened slightly and exchanged glances before sitting down on the sofa in a row. Across from them sat Rio, Miharu, Satsuki, Masato, and Aishia, so it was like they were sitting face to face.

“To start with the conclusion, Aki will be going with Takahisa to the kingdom of Centostella. Or, well, that’s what most likely will end up happening at present. If she says she wants to stay, then there’s the chance that she can remain at the Galarc castle, but…” Rio trailed off.

“You’re being strangely evasive. Did something happen?” Celia asked softly, watching Rio’s face.

“Masato wants to explain that, being their younger brother.” Rio handed things over to Masato.

“Umm, thanks to Haruto and everyone here, those of us

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who came here from Earth were able to safely reunite with each other, but… Though we were reunited, we still ended up arguing about who would go where. Between Miharu, Aki, and myself… As well as my brother…" Masato was a little nervous, as he began his explanation with difficulty. "We all discussed it at the castle. The biggest factor was that Satsuki and my brother are heroes, so they can't leave their respective kingdoms. In a situation like that, Miharu and I wanted to stay with Haruto, but my brother wanted us to go with him… Aki wanted to stay with him, so she obeyed…"

Celia and the others listened to Masato speak in silence. They knew that Aki had a strong attachment to her brother, as they had witnessed it first-hand, and they also knew she adored Miharu just as much—if not more. That was why they weren't too surprised to hear there had been arguments about who was going where, however…

"To put it bluntly, my brother was in love with Miharu. But Miharu didn't share the sentiment, since her feelings are for Haruto, so he got *really* jealous. It was so obvious, even a bystander could see it."

Masato's unexpected information made Celia and the others startle in shock. Every one of them turned to stare at Miharu. As soon as she processed Masato's words, she turned bright red.

"…W-Wait, what are you saying, Masato?!"

"Huh…?" Masato made a perplexed face for a moment, before soon correcting his mistake. "Ah, I was talking about how my brother was jealous of Haruto, which is the reason why he caused such a commotion…"

He seemed to realize what was wrong with his statement about Miharu's feelings for Rio. His head had been occupied with the explanation of the situation, so it was a completely accidental slip of the tongue. "H-Huh? Was I wrong?" He tried to offer a way out, but it was too late to cover up the obvious.

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“A-About what?” Miharu’s eyes wandered as she tried to play dumb. Rio was maintaining an uncomfortable silence after being mixed up in the situation.

“Hrrmmm…” Latifa was glaring at Rio.

Meanwhile, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were exchanging meaningful looks. Incidentally, Celia had completely frozen with her eyes the size of saucers.

What a sinful man you are, Haruto…

Satsuki saw the reaction of the women of the stone house and sighed tiredly. She stared at Rio with a disapproving pout on her lips.

“A-Anyway, let me continue.” Masato regretted his ill-timed words and forcefully changed the subject.

“Th… That’s…” Miharu mumbled quietly, shocked. It was a series of verbal slips on Masato’s part.

“A-At any rate, my brother went on a jealousy-fueled rampage. He challenged Haruto to a petty duel over Miharu and got beaten up, but…” Masato hurried with his continuation, rattling on until he reached a good place to pause.

The nuance is slightly off if you say we were dueling over Miharu, though, Rio thought dubiously. He had actually fought to stop Takahisa from restraining Miharu’s ability to choose what she wanted to do, but the way Masato said it made it sound like a classic plot of the winner receiving Miharu’s hand in marriage…

But, whether that doubt was right or not, Celia and the others twitched in reaction to Rio’s duel over Miharu.

“For whatever unthinkable reason, after losing the duel my brother decided to kidnap Miharu and take her to the Centostella Kingdom by force.”

“Huh?!” Everyone immediately stiffened at the news that Miharu was kidnapped.

“Are you okay, Miharu?!” Sara asked in a panic.

Miharu smiled gently to reassure everyone. “Yeah. Haruto

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saved me right away. I wasn't even harmed—everything's all right."

"Thank goodness…" Celia, Sara, Orphia, Alma, and Latifa all sighed in relief.

"But I think Aki has it worse than me, so…" Miharu looked at Masato with a frown, encouraging him to continue.

"Like Miharu said, the problem is Aki. I know it'll be a shock to hear, but Aki assisted my brother in the attempt to kidnap Miharu," Masato said with a stiff expression.

"Wha…" Everyone was rendered speechless; the first one to speak up was Celia.

"…What is Aki doing now?"

"She's in the castle with my brother."

"A kidnapping incident within the castle walls is normally enough to warrant an execution. Were they punished in any way…?"

"That won't happen… I think. Right, Haruto?" Hearing the word "execution" made Masato slightly nervous.

"The punishment is limited to being placed under supervision as she's the little sister of the hero. Similarly, as long as Satsuki and Miharu don't seek a more severe punishment, the Galarc Kingdom's king has decided not to pursue an aggressive form of punishment against Takahisa. And the Centostella Kingdom won't act against their own hero, either," Rio answered, reassuring everyone.

"I see… So what are you guys going to do about Aki?" Celia asked.

"No matter the motive, the fact is that she tried to kidnap Miharu. It isn't something that should be forgiven easily, and doing so won't benefit Aki. That's why we discussed things and agreed that the victim shouldn't be the one to reach out without some kind of action from Aki first," Rio answered stiffly.

Celia frowned, her expression pained. "I see…"

"Of course, there's a lot that we want to say to them. But

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Aki's been too dependent on Miharu, so we decided that we had to harden our hearts a bit here. We have to make her think about what she did wrong and apologize by herself." Satsuki pursed her lips as though she had swallowed something bitter. If Miharu forgave Aki here, it was likely that Aki would cling onto Miharu's sense of kindness…

"…While I haven't known her as long as Miharu has, I know that Aki isn't a hopelessly terrible child. That's why I'm sure she must be reflecting on things right now. She should be wanting to apologize. When she does, I hope you'll scold her a lot, talk a lot, and make up," Sara said, vexed and frustrated.

"We all feel the same way, Sara," Orphia said with a gentle smile.

"Right. Her ill feelings towards Haruto have worsened a lot over the years, so it'll be difficult for her to come forward with honesty, but if she can come to terms with those feelings and apologize sincerely to Miharu and Haruto, I think we'd all be able to go back to normal. If that's what Aki wants," Satsuki said with a gentle expression.

Masato closed his eyes in thought. "…Well, when I went to see her, she was sobbing so hard she couldn't even speak, so I bet she's reflecting on it. But my brother's even worse than Aki in many ways, so I think it'd be bad if those two remained together alone," he said wearily.

"…That may be true," Satsuki agreed with difficulty.

Masato's face twisted bitterly. "But I don't think that means my brother should be left alone, either. He'd sulk and become stubborn, so that won't be good. If you force Aki away from him, she might rebel, as well. That would just create more trouble. Honestly, I feel bad for having siblings that are such pains in the ass…" He bowed his head at all of them.

"There's no need to apologize," Rio said, the others echoing him in agreement.

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“Since Aki says she wants to stay of her own accord, there’s a high chance the two of them will remain together… I think it’d be better to have someone to be there with them, telling them off so they don’t end up straying from the correct path. It has to be someone who can stand up to my siblings without backing down. So that means… that means…” Masato paused for a long moment, as though to confirm his feelings. Then, he said resolutely: “That means the only one possible is me, their brother.

“It can’t be Miharu, who’s loved by the two of them. Or Satsuki, who’s admired by the two of them. Or Haruto, who’s envied and resented by them. It has to be someone who can argue with them on a familial level, as a sibling. No one else would work. I can’t really put the reason into words, but I feel like I have to be the one to do this. That’s why…”

He couldn’t explain the reason well, but everyone present understood what was in heart. As proof of that, they were all listening to Masato’s words seriously and gazing upon him with respect.

“That’s why I talked to Haruto and the others and thought about this a lot. I’m going to go. If I have to let those two go to the Centostella Kingdom like this, then I’ll go with them. I wanted to tell you all this, so I asked to be in charge of the explanation of the incident to you all. That’s how it is, so…” Masato trailed off, unable to find the right words to explain the reasoning of his thoughts. He appeared a little uneasy.

“Are you still doubting your decision?” Rio asked Masato.

“That’s not it, I don’t think. It’s just… I can’t help but wonder what everyone thinks about this…” Masato said, looking at everyone’s faces. He was still only twelve years old —it was understandable for him to be uneasy.

“I think you’re amazing,” Rio said immediately.

“…Huh?”

“I think you’re amazing, Masato. I’m the kind of person to hesitate and distance myself, so I admire that earnest

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positivity of yours. I respect it. It's almost dazzling to see…" Rio said, commending Masato from the bottom of his heart. Aki was Amakawa Haruto's little sister, but he hadn't been able to do anything brother-like. Even after reuniting in this world, he had been unable to grasp the sense of distance between them and ignored the issue like Miharu had done.

"I think you're amazing, too," Satsuki said. "As their friend and upperclassman, I want to do something about those two… But there's a line I shouldn't cross. I don't know where that line is, so I believe the best choice for me right now is to keep my distance and refrain from forgiving them easily. I realized there are things we can't do for them even if we stay with them. I didn't have the courage to go that far, I didn't consider things enough. But, Masato, you're able to do all that. That's why you're amazing."

"I agree. Masato looks radiant for being able to do what we can't. I… Aki adored me as an older sister, but I always held back when it came to mentioning Haruto before her. I couldn't be her older sister in the true sense. Masato, even though you met Aki after me, you've become her family more than me. I feel so disappointed in myself… That's why you look dazzling, Masato," Miharu said, looking at Masato admiringly.

"You're already a wonderful adult, Masato," Sara giggled.

"I know, right?"

"Yep."

Orphia and Alma both nodded their agreement.

"It's true. You've become stronger and more admirable than me, the eldest one here." Celia also saw Masato as someone radiant, though she had a faint shadow over her face.

"Masato is an adult," Aishia uttered.

"Hehe, you're so cool, Masato," Latifa praised with a carefree smile.

"W-What are you all going on about? Gosh…" The

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continuous praise and illuminated gazes of everyone made Masato blush in embarrassment.

“If it’s you, Masato, we can leave it to you and not worry about it. That’s what it means,” Satsuki giggled, winking mischievously.

“I-In that case, you can all rest assured and leave everything to me! I don’t want this incident to be the reason for everyone to be gloomy. Just sit back and live like you always have. T-That’s right—Haruto, let’s go take that bath. I’ve been looking forward to that. Let’s go, yeah? I’ll wash your back for you!”

Unable to bear the embarrassment any longer, Masato started rambling rapidly. He stood up and pulled Rio by the hand, briskly rushing away to the bathroom.

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Chapter 3: Farewell, Onto a New Journey

The morning after Masato informed the residents of the stone house of his decision to go to Centostella, he was accompanied by Rio and the others to go and discuss things with Lilianna. There, he explained his thoughts and asked for Lilianna's permission to go to Centostella to help Takahisa and Aki turn over a new leaf.

Lilianna didn't have any confidence in her own ability to assist Takahisa and Aki right now, so she welcomed Masato with a deep bow of her head. It was decided that Masato would move from Satsuki's quarters to Lilianna's from that night onwards.

They would depart from the Galarc Kingdom in two days' time, and in that time he would visit Satsuki's quarters often to report on Takahisa and Aki's status. Apparently, they had gotten into a huge fight right off the bat, and were currently giving each other the cold shoulder.

Then, the day of their departure finally came. In the central garden of the Galarc castle, Masato and Lilianna exchanged farewells with Rio, Miharu, and Satsuki.

"Later, then. I'll be going now."

"Take care, Masato."

"You too, Miharu," Masato grinned brightly.

"Don't push yourself too hard, and stay out of trouble. I know you're a picky eater, so make sure you eat balanced meals, okay?" Miharu was worrying so much like a mother, Masato could only nod with a strained smile.

"Yeah, I know."

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“Aki and Takahisa, too… Take care of them.”

“Of course. Leave the two of them to me. I’m in the middle of a huge fight with Takahisa, but I’ll fight with him as much as I need to. Rather than worrying about me, you should focus on supporting Haruto the best you can, Miharu,” Masato said, looking at Rio.

“I won’t do anything that would inconvenience Miharu,” Rio chuckled.

“That’s not what I meant…” Masato glanced at Miharu and decided not to say anything that would anger her, changing the topic smoothly instead. “Oh well. Take care, Haruto. I’ll continue practicing my sword over there, as well, so I’ll show you my growth next time.”

“…Yeah.” Rio seemed to sense what Masato was hinting at, as he nodded rather awkwardly.

“You take care, too, Satsuki,” Masato said.

“I will. I’ll always be in the castle, so you have to send me letters regularly, okay? If I don’t receive any letters I’ll assume something happened and march over there,” Satsuki said jokingly.

“Ahaha, got it,” Masato agreed lightly. Beside him stood Lilianna, who smiled.

“While letters are important, I can promise to bring Sir Masato to the Galarc Kingdom on a regular basis. Our kingdom is closed off, but I am much indebted to everyone and vow to do my best. I understand if you do not wish to visit, but if you do, I will welcome you,” she said with a respectful bow.

“That isn’t the case at all. Please show us around Centostella one day.”

“Gladly,” Satsuki giggled, making Lilianna smile in return.

Masato rubbed his nose shyly. “…Shall we get going, then? Talking any longer will just make me feel sad,” he suggested to Lilianna.

“Sure, if that is what you wish,” Lilianna nodded warmly.

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“Hehe. See you all, then. I really don’t like depressing moods, so let’s part with a smile, yeah?” Masato said with a mischievous smile.

“I’ll write you lots of letters, too. Feel free to write to me if you’re ever worried about anything,” Satsuki said to Masato’s back as he departed.

“I will, thanks!” Masato turned back and thanked her before leaving with a wave. Lilianna followed from diagonally behind him, and her attendant Frill silently followed at a distance.

“There he goes. Gosh, did you see him show off? Since when did he act so similarly to a certain someone, I wonder,” Satsuki said, glancing at Rio’s side profile.

“Do you mean… Takahisa?” That was the only name that came to Rio’s mind, but—

“Nope, not that,” Satsuki denied.

“Hehe.” Miharu seemed to have an idea who that someone was, as she was giggling in amusement.

“Well, it seems like that someone is completely oblivious, so if anything, he’s more like a copycat, I guess,” Satsuki sighed.

“…?” Rio simply cocked his head in confusion.

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After Masato parted with Rio and the others, he walked forward without stopping. Knowing he would feel reluctant to leave if he turned back, he chose to walk forward in silence. Lilianna followed diagonally behind him in silence, as well.

“You’re very strong, Sir Masato,” she said to him warmly.

“…I am?” Masato slowed down and cocked his head in wonder.

“From what I can see, yes.”

“How so?”

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“I believe the ability to act for someone else’s sake without expecting anything in return is the embodiment of a strong mind. Most people would normally think so highly of themselves, they would never make a sacrifice for another person’s well-being. Even if that person was their own family,” Lilianna said, frowning slightly.

“…Haha.” Masato looked shy for a moment. “If you’re going to say that, then Haruto’s much stronger than me. He did all sorts of things to help us out without anything in return.”

“Indeed, Sir Amakawa is a very wonderful person,” Lilianna nodded with a soft smile.

“…Do you like men like Haruto, Princess Lilianna? Have you fallen for Haruto?” Masato asked curiously. As far as Masato knew, all the women around Rio had fallen for him without exception. That was why he wondered how Rio appeared to Lilianna, since she only became acquainted recently and was less familiar with him.

Lilianna blinked in wonder. “Goodness, no. I am not familiar enough with Sir Amakawa to feel any such adoration for him. Even if I did, Sir Amakawa already has so many lovely ladies surrounding him—there would be no place for me.” She shook her head with a hearty laugh.

“No, no, Miharu and Satsuki are beautiful, but Princess Lilianna is just as beautiful in my eyes…” Masato said in exasperation to Lilianna’s self-depreciation of her own beauty.

“Well, I’m grateful for the flattery.”

“No no, it wasn’t flattery… If anything, you’re closer to my ideal type of woman,” Masato said shyly.

After all, both Miharu and Satsuki are both too familiar to me.

Their image as his guardians was too strong—he couldn’t see them in any other way.

Lilianna blinked before staring in amazement. “Well, I

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suppose I'm very happy and honored to hear that…"

"Ah, that wasn't an attempt at flirting, yeah? Of course, I'd love to marry a woman as wonderful as you someday in the future, though," Masato added in a hurry. He was talking to an older woman—a princess, no less—who he hadn't known for long, so his tone was stiffer than normal, but he was still his usual innocent self.

"Hehe. I'm sure you will grow into a wonderful young gentleman in a few years, but if I'm still unmarried by then, I'd be considered a royal spinster. If you don't mind marrying a mature-aged woman, then I shall happily accept your offer," Lilianna said with an amused giggle. It felt like she had gained a fun little brother, causing her to joke around with him lightly.

"H-Huh?! D-Don't make fun of me!" Masato yelled, blushing furiously.

"Oh? Wasn't it you who made fun of me first?"

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“No… Well, I suppose. But I didn’t mean it like that! Anyways, we’re keeping everyone waiting, so let’s hurry back.”

“Of course,” Lilianna nodded, looking only slightly reluctant. The thought of the person waiting ahead of her made her want to extend their carefree conversation a little longer…

But she couldn’t do that. Not long after they left Rio and the others, they arrived at a location not too far away.

“Yo, Bro. Aki. Thanks for waiting,” Masato said to the silently standing Takahisa and uncomfortable-looking Aki. They were surrounded by Lilianna’s knights: Hilda, Kiara, and Alice.

“…”

Neither Takahisa nor Aki said anything. While Aki looked pale and uneasy, Takahisa tried to maintain a poker face over his clearly bad mood. After the incident, Masato had gotten into a huge fight with him, making him even more sullen than before.

But Masato saw through him completely.

“You were watching, weren’t you? How was it, seeing Miharu for the first time in a few days?” he asked Takahisa and Aki. Indeed—from their current position, it was possible to see the area where they had been exchanging farewells. Takahisa had been facing the other way when Masato and Lilianna walked over, but there was no way he hadn’t been watching earlier.

“…” Takahisa’s sullen face became even more obvious.

“What? I’m here with you just as you wanted, dear brother. Shouldn’t you look a little happier?”

“…”

“Or are you saying there’s no point in Aki and me being here without Miharu?” Masato asked provocatively, not bothering to mince his words.

“Tch…” Takahisa glared at Masato sharply, but

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nevertheless held his silence.

"If you were watching, you should know by now. Haruto is the one who'll stand beside Miharu, not you. Miharu won't be happy unless she's with Haruto. You need to accept it already—that you're not worthy of her."

"…" It was as though his little brother had just told him he had lost. And it was the truth—Miharu had certainly seemed happier being beside Rio. That led to an even greater sense of defeat that made him feel helpless and desperate, but he couldn't say anything right now.

"After calling Haruto a criminal over and over again, you were the one who ended up committing a crime. Honestly, I can't even laugh about it anymore…" Masato trailed off, looking grim.

…He's still a criminal, too. A murderer. And yet, and yet…

Just what was different between himself and Haruto? Takahisa looked down and clenched his fists.

"I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it: I'm not staying with you out of pity. I'm coming along to make sure you two don't tread down this foolish path any further. I'm not forgiving either of you until you apologize to both Miharu and Haruto," Masato said with a huff and walked off.

"Now, please come this way, Sir Takahisa, Lady Aki," Lilianna said to the two of them, before following Masato. Takahisa watched them leave and glanced over at the area where they had been exchanging farewells just moments ago. Although there was no one left there—

…Are you saying that I was wrong?

He had caught a glimpse of Miharu smiling happily beside Haruto, which had made his face twist with frustration. Aki watched Takahisa's expression from beside him with a sad look.

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One week had passed since Takahisa, Aki, and Masato had departed for the Centostella Kingdom. During the week, they saw Liselotte off as she returned to Amande to deal with her work at the Ricca Guild, visited Liselotte's parents to greet them, and formally reported to Francois about their plans to continue traveling. Time had passed in the blink of an eye.

"Aww... First Masato and the others leave, and now Haruto and Miharu are leaving. I'm so lonely! When will we get to meet up again? I wanted to eat Haruto's cooking, too... Liselotte's busy, so she left early, as well..."

It was finally the day when Rio and Miharu were due to leave the castle. The three of them—including Satsuki—were seated around the dining table in the living room eating breakfast in the morning when Satsuki had spoken up with dramatic sorrow. Rather than being sulky, it seemed like she was pleading to see them again soon.

"I'll try to bring Miharu back to the castle regularly. If there's a chance, we'll sneak you out of the castle at night to come to the stone house—you should have said so earlier."

"I can't do that. You promised both Liselotte and me at the banquet, so it wouldn't be fair to her, right? Anyways, it'd be more fun to eat together," Satsuki said, smiling cutely.

"I understand. If I have the chance to see Liselotte again, I shall inform her then. Feel free to pass on the message if you manage to see Liselotte first, too," Rio said with a smile.

"Yay. I'll be looking forward to it, then. The meals at the castle are delicious, but they're all rather oily and heavy on the seasoning. A lot of it tastes greasy, so I had them adjust it to a lighter taste, but I've really wanted to eat rice, miso soup, and pickled foods," Satsuki emphasized with clenched fists.

"I agree. I could eat a Japanese meal everyday while living in that house with Haruto, but after two weeks at the castle I've started to miss it a lot too," Miharu agreed with a giggle.

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“Right? That’s why both of you should come back soon. I’ll be waiting! Maybe Aki and Masato will also start missing Japanese meals and come back,” Satsuki said with a laugh.

Rio and Miharu exchanged looks before nodding softly. “Perhaps.”

“…And so, I’ll be waiting for you two to return. Masato left in such a cold way, and I don’t like emotional farewells, either. If I chat with you two for too long before you leave, I’ll end up crying in front of the people in the castle, so I’m going to say this now,” Satsuki said a little sadly, staring at Rio and Miharu. She took a deep breath to calm down. Then —

“Take care, you two.” She smiled from the bottom of her heart as she saw them off.

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After breakfast, before Rio and Miharu were due to leave the castle, they met with King Francois with Satsuki in tow.

“Will you really be leaving the capital on foot?” Francois’ eyes widened when he heard the transport method Rio had chosen. As Haruto Amakawa, honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom, he was an upper-class noble on par with a count. It would normally be unthinkable for someone like that to walk out of the city with no guards.

However, inferior guards would only pose a burden in Rio’s case…

“Yes—this is what we’re used to. If the worst happens, I can run while carrying Miharu, which would be faster than a carriage.”

“Bwahaha. I see—fine, then. You don’t fit standards in a good way, after all,” Francois agreed with a smile. “Where will you be heading next?”

“I’ve made a promise with a close friend, so for the time being I’ll be leaving the area under Your Majesty’s control

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and heading for a city to the west. I haven't decided on anything beyond that, however…"

Rio informed him of his general plans, stating that his plans were still rather vague. That being said, his answer wasn't necessarily a lie. With Miharu's situation settled for the time being, he wanted to do something to help Celia's problems next, but it was up to her if she wanted him to do something about it so soon after they reunited.

He had yet to tell Celia that her former fiancé, Charles Arbor, had attended the banquet, so he needed to inform her of the Beltrum Kingdom news he had obtained.

"The west, hm? With the collar tab I have given you, every area of this kingdom will be accommodating to you. Friendly foreign nations should treat you as nobility. Though it may be a little strange to call you a noble of our kingdom when you are not bound by any duties… At any rate, do come to the castle regularly. Lady Satsuki and Charlotte will both be happy to see you," Francois said with a laugh.

"It would be an honor. Miharu would also enjoy that, so I promise to visit regularly." Rio lowered his head respectfully.

"…Good. Now, I shouldn't keep you any longer. Charlotte, see them to the gate with Lady Satsuki." Francois nodded.

"I understand, Father. Please, come this way." Charlotte immediately stood up, facing Rio, Miharu, and Satsuki seated across from her. The three of them stood up and bid their farewells to Francois before following Charlotte out of the room.

After that, the four of them walked along the corridors of the castle and went outside to the gardens. Before long, they arrived at the gate.

"See you later, then, Miharu. Haruto." Satsuki spoke to them as though she was seeing off her family while they stepped out for a moment. She didn't like emotional farewells, which was why she kept her words short and

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sweet. As she had informed them in advance, she didn't have much to say.

"Yes. We'll be back soon," Miharu answered, smiling a little sadly.

"Let's meet up again soon," Rio said after Miharu.

Satsuki ducked her head a little and nodded, then turned to look at Charlotte beside her. "Yup… Do you have something to say too, Char?"

"Let's see. Both of you—take care. And one more thing, Sir Haruto," Charlotte said, addressing Rio.

"Yes, what is it?" Rio tilted his head and asked.

"You heard what Father said earlier, yes? That coming to the castle would make Lady Satsuki and me happy."

"Yes…" He had certainly heard that, but he couldn't tell what Charlotte intended with her words, so he only nodded vaguely.

"Then, would it not make you happy, Sir Haruto?" Charlotte puffed her cheeks up slightly and questioned Rio in a cute tone.

Rio mustered an awkward smile. "Of course—nothing would make me happier than to see the two of you."

"Oh my, is that true?" Charlotte's face sparkled with happiness.

"Yes," Rio nodded with a faint smile.

"In that case, how about going on a date with me the next time you visit? It'll have to be inside the castle, though," Charlotte said casually.

"…Huh?" Even Rio couldn't help but be surprised by that, his honest confusion slipping from his lips. Satsuki and Miharu were both wide-eyed with shock.

"H-Hey, hey. Didn't you say you admired Haruto like an older brother? Is it okay for you to say things like that as a princess?" Satsuki asked in a fluster.

"It isn't that okay, but it's just us here. None of you will go prattling about it, yes?"

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Because she trusted them. It was as though Charlotte was saying that with a truly pleased face. Indeed, there was no one else in the vicinity. There was a gatekeeper by the gate, but they were far enough to be out of earshot.

“Of course we won’t… But even so… Don’t you think going on a date without someone you consider your older brother is a little too much?” Satsuki’s voice was oddly high-pitched, her face slightly panicked.

“Hehe. It’s true that I considered him to be an older brother, but it turns out I was mistaken.” Charlotte tapped her index finger against her mouth, staring at Rio with a coquettish smile. “It seems I’ve started to harbor a liking to Sir Haruto personally.”

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Her explosive statement left Rio and the others shocked.

“Wha… What are you saying—just as they’re about to leave?” Satsuki was nearly rendered speechless, but somehow managed to speak.

“It’s because they’re about to leave. This way, Sir Haruto won’t forget about me until we meet again, hm.”

Charlotte giggled cutely and looked at Rio, Miharu, and Satsuki in turn. Miharu and Satsuki were taken aback and at a loss for words. Instead, they looked at Rio to see his response.

“Umm…” Rio was rather anxious himself, unsure of how to reply to a princess like Charlotte correctly.

“Please let me hear your reply the next time you come to the castle. Even I’m feeling a little shy right now, so I bid you farewell here,” Charlotte said, approaching Rio and Miharu and pushing them gently on the back. Once they walked through the gate outside, she waved them off with a smile.

“…Yes. Then, umm… Excuse us.”

Encouraged by Charlotte’s smile, Rio and Miharu exchanged glances and walked forward. After a while, they heard Satsuki questioning Charlotte in a somewhat flustered voice behind them. However, unsure of how he would reply if he returned anyway, Rio started walking forward while feeling slightly hesitant.

“W-What are you going to do, Haruto?” Miharu was slightly panicked, bothered by what had happened.

Rio averted his gaze from Miharu and answered guiltily. “What to do… I’m confused, as well. I’ll just have to think about it before the next time we meet.” It wasn’t like he was dating Miharu, so it wasn’t as though it would be cheating. But it still felt strangely awkward.

Meanwhile, far above them, a lone man was floating in the air, overlooking them. From the ground he was only as large as a speck, practically blended into the background of the

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sky, allowing him to avoid the notice of others. Who knew how long he had been watching?

"Finally... They're departing."

The man—Reiss—witnessed Rio being cornered by Miharu to answer her question about Charlotte, and smiled faintly.

"Now, I shall proceed with scouting."

In order to use the chance of unintentionally discovering Rio at the banquet, he began to secretly tail them.

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Interlude: Sakata Hiroaki's Interlude

Meanwhile, at the Restoration that was essentially being led by Duke Huguenot—

Their hero, Sakata Hiroaki, remained in the Galarc Kingdom instead of returning to their headquarters in Marquess Rodan's territory.

As the symbols of the Restoration, Hiroaki and Flora were to use this chance to stay in the Galarc Kingdom to mutually deepen their friendship; it was what Duke Huguenot had discussed with King Francois the other day.

That being said, the mutual deepening of their friendship was for show. Their real aim was to implicitly select a candidate from the Galarc Kingdom's nobility to become Hiroaki's future concubine as they continued their friendly relationship.

Thus, on the day when Rio and Miharu departed the kingdom, Hiroaki was mingling with the noble ladies of Galarc with Flora and Roanna.

Today's partner was Lisette, the daughter of the great lord Duke Gregory. However, today wasn't their first time meeting each other—they had already interacted several times, and were invited to a tea party with several of her followers today.

Incidentally, the reason why Flora and Roanna were present was because they were representatives of the Restoration and needed to demonstrate to the Galarc side that they would one day become Hiroaki's first wife or an equally high-ranking concubine. That being said, they

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couldn't butt in unnecessarily, so they were simply watching over Hiroaki interacting with the young noblewomen of the Galarc Kingdom openly.

"Why, Sir Hiroaki seems to be very fond of eating sweets." The young women were currently chatting happily with Hiroaki in order to please him.

"Yeah, though I may appear less manly because of it," Hiroaki answered with a shrug.

"Not at all!"

"Yes. If you enjoy sweet foods, that just means it's something else we have in common to discuss."

"Moreover, making sweets is a hobby of Lady Lisette's. How about you try the sweets she makes, Sir Hiroaki?"

"Why, that would be lovely. The cake Lady Lisette made before was so delicious…"

"Lady Lisette, wouldn't this be a good chance to make something for Sir Hiroaki?"

The girls displayed magnificent coordination as they gossiped openly. They were daughters of dukes themselves, but they made sure to remember to praise Lisette, the host of the tea party.

"…Fine. It'll be my first time serving a gentleman, but if Sir Hiroaki so desires, I'd be happy to do so." Lisette blushed, peering at Hiroaki's face shyly.

"Well, I don't mind… But are you sure? I'm not a man that would lie about food. I'll give my opinions without any reserve. Is that all right?" Hiroaki's lips turned upwards teasingly.

"Well, when I imagine myself disappointing you, I feel very nervous, but… I want you to try my sweets despite that," Lisette said, batting her eyes at Hiroaki.

"Oh? Sounds good to me. Then it seems like we'll have to pick a date for our next tea party. I'll eat whatever you make, so bring it," Hiroaki said smugly.

"Of course!" Lisette nodded happily.

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After that, the conversation continued to revolve around Hiroaki as time passed. Hiroaki seemed to be faintly aware that the people present here desired marriage and was enjoying the harem-like circumstances. However—

"Hahaha…"

Out of nowhere, thoughts of Liselotte—another noblewoman in Galarc who Hiroaki favored the most—came to mind and pulled him back to reality. If he were to choose a fiancee aside from Flora and Roanna, the first person that Hiroaki considered most suitable was Liselotte. It was disappointing that she had departed for Amande so soon after the end of the banquet.

Well, Lisette's cute, too, and understands how to tickle a man's instincts. She pays attention to things outside of just typical conversation, so I want to give her a passing mark, but… When compared to Liselotte… she just can't hold a candle to her, really. Lisette and Liselotte. Even their names are similar. But it's like she's just one charm short of being a heroine…

He gave a rather harsh—if not rude—assessment of Lisette in his mind.

This is no good. I have to forget about Liselotte for now.

Hiroaki sighed quietly, trying to snap out of his mood.

"Are you not feeling well? You seem a little pale." Lisette noticed the change in his expression and watched him softly.

"Ah, no, that's not it. I just remembered something." He hadn't wanted to say his honest thoughts out loud like a fool, so he tried to evade the question awkwardly.

"Oh my, what did you remember?"

"Hmm, let me think." Hiroaki's gaze wandered as he racked his brains for an excuse, when a perfect one came to mind. "Ah, right. Did you hear the rumor of the hero from another kingdom creating a commotion in the castle the other day?"

"…Yes, somewhat. There were several witnesses, after all."

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Lisette and the girls exchanged looks before nodding nervously. They knew that Hiroaki was referring to Takahisa, but no matter how much Takahisa was at fault, they had to be extremely careful when speaking negatively about the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

It would be one matter if they were only in the presence of trusted friends, but as public figures, they couldn't outwardly look down on another kingdom's hero. Any careless comment could lead to disastrous problems for their family. It was understandable that they would hesitate to respond.

"After hearing what happened, I felt humiliated as another hero. How utterly embarrassing. Be honest—what did you think?" Because he was another hero, Hiroaki didn't seem to have such considerations in mind, and boldly sought the opinion of Lisette and the others.

"Umm..." Lisette and the girls all broke out in a cold sweat.

"Sir Hiroaki, please refrain from touching upon delicate topics." Roanna, who had been observing silently until now, sighed as she admonished Hiroaki.

"Hmm? Well, it may be so for you guys, but to me it was more like, ah, he's gone and done it now. I wish I could have had the chance to give him a piece of my mind," Hiroaki lamented.

"..." Roanna held her tongue and said nothing more.

"Well, I suppose he got a little too full of himself. With a slightly good-looking face like that, he was probably a normie in Japan, as well. Must have assumed he could do whatever he wanted the moment he gained some cheat-like power in another world, huh?" Hiroaki started bad-mouthing Takahisa animatedly.

"However, in reality, you can't just do what you want. Being able to act like a piece of shit without any repercussions is a privilege for main characters in works of

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fiction. If you cross a line you shouldn't cross in reality, of course everyone would be completely disgusted. Well, I suppose even if he were a main character, I'd be pretty stressed reading about him being overpowered, defeated, and then having his woman taken away from him. That kind of plot would definitely get flamed online…"

After saying that much, he seemed to feel a kind of sympathy for Takahisa and smiled bitterly. However, in the end, no one else present was able to understand what Hiroaki was trying to say—they all watched on in awkward confusion.

Hiroaki seemed to realize that the reaction wasn't what he had hoped for. "Ah, let me put it simply. As another hero, I just wished he would act with more consideration of his position. If just one person like him is a hero, it hurts the image of the other heroes, too. Which wouldn't be good for the kingdoms borrowing the power of the heroes, either, you know?" He gave an exaggerated shrug and looked around the room for agreement.

While everyone was hesitating to agree, Roanna opened her mouth first. "…I'm always amazed by your awareness of your position as a hero and figure of the public. As expected of you."

"Ah, no, it's only obvious. Nothing to be praised over." Hiroaki looked slightly embarrassed as he responded humbly.

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Chapter 4: Celia's Decision

Meanwhile, after leaving the castle and the capital, Rio and Miharu walked down the main road until they reached a completely unpopulated area and slipped away.

"You can come out now, Aishia," Rio called out. She appeared shortly after.

"Okay."

"You've been stuck in your spirit form for a while now—you must have been bored."

"Thank you for everything while we were in the capital, Ai-chan," Rio and Miharu both said to Aishia immediately. The hardest worker while they were in the capital had been Aishia. She acted as the messenger between them and the stone house, and worked hard in the shadows during the kidnapping incident with Takahisa.

They hadn't told Satsuki that Aishia was a spirit, so she couldn't materialize inside the castle. Thus, it had been a while since the three of them had come face-to-face with each other.

"It's okay. Being inside Haruto is comfortable," Aishia said in her usual quiet and toneless voice.

"I see..." Rio grinned a little shyly. He didn't know what it felt like to stay inside a contract partner as a spirit form, but being told he was comfortable made him feel strangely embarrassed.

"Well, there's no point in staying here. Shall we head home?"

"Yup."

Thus, they decided to move from here by air. Or were about to do so, when—

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“Ah, before that. I wanted to talk to Ai-chan about something, is that okay? I’ll be done soon,” Miharu said.

“…Yes, of course,” Rio tactfully agreed and gave the two of them some distance. Then, Aishia cocked her head at Miharu.

“What is it, Miharu?” she asked.

“Erm, I wanted to thank you, Ai-chan,” Miharu said a little shyly.

“For what?”

“For Haruto, and Haru-kun. You told me before we came to the capital, right? That if I want to stay with him, I can’t run away.”

“Yup, I did.”

But why did that need a thank-you? Aishia seemed to be asking that as she tilted her head.

“The reason my introverted self didn’t run away is thanks to you, Ai-chan. That’s why I’m here now. I wanted to thank you for that, so—thank you, Ai-chan.” Miharu smiled gently and hugged Aishia.

“…Yup.” Aishia nodded with a soft smile on her face, returning the hug.

“I might need your help again in the future, but if you’re ever troubled by anything, you can come and talk to me about it too. Especially if it’s about Haruto. There’s no need to hold back around me.”

“Okay.”

The two of them exchanged their feelings in a quiet but firm way.

“Shall we go, then? We shouldn’t keep Haruto waiting any more.”

“Yup.”

They broke free from their embrace and returned to Rio. They departed for the stone house without any questions from him.

After that, they spotted the stone house hidden amongst

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rocks within a matter of moments and descended before it. For the record, Rio had been the one to carry Miharu, who couldn't fly yet.

"Here you go." Rio gently set Miharu on the ground.

"T-Thanks." Miharu's cheeks turned red as she nodded shyly. She had already gotten used to Rio carrying her, so she wasn't as conscious of it anymore, but for some reason she was now showing a naive reaction.

"Miharu, your face is red."

Aishia pointed out, tilting her head.

"R-Really? I don't think so."

Miharu feigned ignorance in a panic. But her honesty showed on her face. She was fair-skinned to begin with, so the blush was clear enough for Rio to notice, too. He had an idea why, as well.

Normally he would write it off as being too full of himself, but he had accidentally heard the conversation between Miharu and Takahisa during the kidnapping incident.

I think I like both. The Haru-kun before he was reincarnated, and the current Haruto. I fell in love with both of them.

And so, even Rio, who was often called a blockhead, could tell when someone liked him after such an incident occurred.

"…"

However, just because he knew he was liked didn't mean he would dig his own grave by acting out of the usual. It was at this time that the door to the stone house opened.

"Welcome back, Onii-chan, Miharu, Aishia!"

The one who leaped out was Latifa. Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma followed after her. With Aishia in her material form, Sara, Orphia, and Alma had noticed their approach through their contracted spirits. On top of that, they used the barriers surrounding the stone house to confirm their return and came outside.

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“We’re back, everyone.” Miharu smiled brightly to gloss over the fact her fact was still flushed.

“Yes, welcome back…” Celia and the others replied, but they seemed to sense something strange about Miharu’s bright behavior—or perhaps they noticed her red face or Rio’s slightly awkward expression. They stared at them with questioning gazes.

“W-What’s wrong, everyone?” Miharu asked in a high-pitched voice.

“N-No, nothing…”

The one who answered was Sara, but everyone was staring at Miharu together. Her reaction was extremely obvious, after all. Without missing a beat, Miharu’s eyes darted about.

“Professor, there’s something I’d like to speak with you about right away. Do you have time?” Rio said to Celia with a strained smile, partly in order to rescue Miharu from her predicament.

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Rio entered the house and invited Celia to his bedroom. He sat in a chair facing her and got to the point. “I wanted to talk to you about the matter of visiting your family home. I don’t have any plans at the moment, so we can go anytime… That’s the first thing.”

“Oh… Is there something else?” Celia nodded, listening to Rio with a serious expression.

“I don’t know how important it is, but I figured you should know that Princess Christina attended along with Charles Arbor. As you can imagine, they gave Duke Huguenot’s faction the cold shoulder, and there was no sign of any possible reconciliation,” Rio explained, bringing up the name of Celia’s former fiancé.

Her face fell. “I see…”

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“And there’s one more thing regarding Princess Christina…”

“Princess Christina?”

“I had a chance to speak with her before she left for a brief moment. She whispered in my ear as she was about to depart, so that Charles Arbor and the other nobles wouldn’t hear. She thanked me for saving Princess Flora during the attack on Amande.”

“…Really?” Celia’s eyes widened in surprise.

“She attended as an ambassador, so she had a certain level of freedom to move about, but her actions were probably being monitored. She was cold to Princess Flora whenever the other nobles were around.”

“…But that was all an act, right? That’s why she thanked you without anyone else hearing.”

“That’s probably the case. She used to worry for Princess Flora a lot back in the Academy, too. And the first time I met you was when Princess Christina marched into the slums in search of Princess Flora, no?” Rio said, recalling the things Christina had done in the past.

Celia looked a little apologetic. “…Yes, that’s right. I was forced to go along with her and scolded by His Majesty for it. In fact, you weren’t a very favorable existence to Princess Christina.”

“No… Well, I knew people hated me, but it didn’t really bother me. She was harmless compared to the other noble children, and never tried to harass me directly at the Academy. She argued with me the first time we met in the slums, but avoided me afterwards.” Rio smiled wryly, certain that Christina had gone out of her way to avoid him.

“…Hey, is it really okay?” Celia asked timidly.

“Is what really okay?”

“It wouldn’t be strange for you to have complicated feelings—or you know, hatred—towards the Beltrum Kingdom. But my family and I are nobles from Beltrum, and

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I can't fully throw aside my position. I have to move for the sake of the kingdom, meaning you have no choice but to assist for my sake…" Celia said with a look of deep contemplation.

Rio sighed. "…Isn't it a bit too late for that? I told you once during the banquet already, in this very room. If there's anything I can do for you, just say the word. I'll make it happen. That's why I carried you away from that wedding. So please don't forget your feelings from when you snuck away from the ceremony, Professor," he said gently.

"…But the situation's different to the last time we spoke. You're an honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom now, right? I don't want you to cross dangerous bridges for my sake and put yourself in a precarious situation… Miharu only just reunited with her hero friend. What if she can't meet her any more? And isn't Miharu your childhood friend from your world before you were reborn?"

"Yes, that's true…"

"In that case, you should take good care of Miharu. Your childhood in this world was spent in the Royal Academy in a situation like that… And before the Academy, you lived a painful life in the slums, so you don't have anyone to call your childhood friend here. Isn't that right?" It seemed like Celia had realized who Miharu was. It was almost as though she was telling Rio to treasure Miharu over herself.

"If we're talking about childhood friends, then I have one in this world, too," Rio said tiredly.

"…Huh? Wait, really?" Celia blinked. That was news to her.

"She's right in front of me. My important childhood friend in this world is you, Professor."

"…W-What… D-Don't tease me like that!" Completely caught off-guard, Celia stuttered speechlessly before blushing and yelling.

"I'm not teasing you. You were with me between the ages

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of seven and twelve, you know? If it's a matter of years spent together in this world, then I've known you the longest," Rio said with confidence.

"B-But… I'm your professor. To call me a c-childhood friend is…" It made her happy. But did she have a right to such a thing?

"Didn't I tell you in the past that I consider you my friend, Professor? Have you forgotten?" Rio chuckled.

"I'm… your friend?" Celia asked uneasily.

"Yes. Are you not? Of course, I consider you my teacher, too. Wait, didn't we have this conversation back at the Academy, too?" Rio tilted his head at the strange sense of deja-vu. He was sure they had a similar conversation in Celia's old research laboratory at the Academy, but he couldn't remember it clearly. But despite that—

"At any rate, it's true that Miharu is important to me. But you're important, too, Professor Celia. If Amakawa Haruto's childhood friend is Miharu, then Rio's childhood friend is Celia Claire. That's what I believe, at least," Rio said with resolution.

"Uhh…" Celia was rendered speechless and reddened by the fact that Rio had spoken so frankly to her face. She was fairly certain it was the first time she was called by her full name.

"You're an important person to me, Professor. That's why I couldn't overlook your marriage to Charles Arbor when I knew it would only make you unhappy. That's why I extended my hand to you. You took it. Nothing has changed about the situation since then. There's no need for you to hold back." Rio held his right hand out to Celia.

"W-What…?" Celia looked down at the hand Rio offered nervously.

"We can head to your family home whenever you want. We can even leave as soon as today or tomorrow, if you'd like. You just have to take my hand."

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With his hand still extended, Rio encouraged Celia to make a decision. A single teardrop rolled down Celia's cheek.

"D-Doing this for someone like me... Just don't blame me if it doesn't go well."

She started crying as she gently grabbed Rio's hand.

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After their conversation, Rio left his bedroom and headed to the living room. Celia shut herself in Rio's room, stating that she didn't want to be seen crying.

Upon reaching the living room, Rio witnessed the sight of Latifa, Sara, Orphia, and Alma surrounding Miharu, hounding her for answers. Aishia sat alone a short distance away, yawning sleepily.

"S-So did you ask him? Or rather, did... Did you manage to c-c-confess to him?" Sara asked Miharu nervously.

"I-It wasn't a confession! I didn't say it to him directly, so it d-didn't count." Miharu waved her hands in denial.

"But it's true that you conveyed your feelings to him, right?"

"Yeah. At this rate, Miharu's going to be one step ahead..."

Alma and Orphia also appeared to be slightly panicked.

"Hmph! So you did love Onii-chan, after all, Miharu!" Latifa pouted unhappily.

"...Umm," Rio said to the room awkwardly.

"Wait, Rio?!"

They had been so absorbed in their conversation that no one noticed that Rio had been in the living room for a while now. Everyone other than Aishia flinched.

"...Err, what were you all talking about?" He had pretty much figured out what they were discussing, but it was so awkward, he decided to feign ignorance.

"I-It's nothing!" Miharu yelled with a flushed face.

"Anyways, what happened with Celia?" Sara cleared her

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throat and asked.

“We were talking about visiting her family home. I’m thinking of leaving as early as tomorrow to head to the Beltrum Kingdom to the west, so I wanted to inform everyone of that. We should have enough hands with Aishia coming along, so if the rest of you want to remain here, it’s an option…”

Sara and the others exchanged glances before enthusiastically offering to go together.

“Of course we’ll come along!”

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Chapter 5: Chance Encounter

The next morning, Rio and the others moved out of the stone house they had been living in and departed for Count Claire's territory in the eastern end of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Rio, Aishia, and Orphia flew with their wind spirit arts while Celia, Miharu, Latifa, Sara, and Alma rode on the back of Orphia's contract spirit, the giant eagle Ariel. By traveling like this, they made it to Count Claire's domain before sundown.

The capital of the domain they had once visited before was called Cleia, where Celia's family home was naturally located. The plan that had been decided with Celia was to descend in the forest near the city and set up the stone house as their base, then wait for nightfall before slipping through the darkness and sneaking into the estate grounds like before.

Roughly half an hour after entering the domain, the capital city could be spotted in the far distance, but—

"Haruto." Aishia suddenly called Rio's name.

"I know. Everyone, there's still a little distance until the city, but we're going to descend into the forest below us now," Rio immediately directed.

"W-What's wrong?" Celia asked, worried about the sudden descent.

Sara had a solid grasp of the situation, so she explained the reason to Celia. "There's something flying near the city. We'll be discovered if we approach like this, so we're going to descend."

"Is it an enchanted ship or something?"

"No, it's probably some kind of creature. I saw a person on

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its back, so it was probably a griffon…”

“…Was it one of the griffons being kept at my house?” Celia wondered with a tilt of her head. While she did so, the party landed in the forest. They were surrounded by densely-growing trees, so it wasn’t likely that the person riding the griffon above would notice them.

“I’d like to see what’s going on, so can everyone set up the stone house and wait here? I might get lost on the way back, so Aishia should stay here, too. Professor Celia can come with me, since she probably knows the city well,” Rio said, giving his instructions briskly.

“Sure, but won’t we be spotted if we fly?”

“That’s why we’ll be running through the forest.”

“Umm, I can use the enchantment for physical ability, but I won’t be able to keep up with you…”

Celia was a typical non-athletic person. As a well-rounded sorcerer she could use all kinds of magic, but even with her physical abilities enhanced, she couldn’t keep up with Rio’s inhuman spirit art enhancements.

But the bigger problem was the fact that the brain couldn’t keep up with the physical boost of the magic. Just enhancing the physical ability wasn’t enough—the athletic senses to control the enhanced body’s movements was also necessary. Celia was completely lacking in that quality. Running in a forest with such unstable footing was out of the question. However—

“It’s okay. I’ll carry you and run. It’ll be shakier than flying through the sky, though.” Problem solved.

“G-Got it.” Hearing that she would be carried by Rio made a faint blush appear on Celia’s cheeks.

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Less than an hour later, Rio and Celia reached the capital of Cleia.

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“…Huh? It’s the Aerial Knights of the Beltrum Kingdom. I wonder why they’re here?”

After getting close enough to the city, they stepped out onto the main road, where Celia stopped and looked up at the sky. Circling above them were the Aerial Knights of Beltrum, riding their griffons. Griffons were known as the lions of the skies, famous for being the other rulers of the skies apart from dragons, and were extremely intelligent.

Some kingdoms domesticated them to use as mounts, but they had volatile tempers and mostly lived in mountain habitats. Their upper bodies were like birds of prey, so their high-pitched screeches were characteristic to them.

“If they’ve dispatched the valuable aerial forces, then something big must have happened… For now, let’s get into the city and gather information.”

“Yeah.” Celia nodded with a stiff expression. Thus, the two of them set off for the city.

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At the moment, Rio and Celia were in the square of the residential district outside Cleia’s outer walls. They wore plain robes and hid their faces under hoods as they walked.

“It’s not very lively, huh…”

“There are lots of people who don’t seem to have homes to live in… The unemployed and the migrants. And even though we’re outside the walls, there are lots of soldiers on patrol.”

Since the areas outside the city walls were largely exempt from taxes, in any city they were normally lined with stalls and filled with bustling activity. However, as far as Rio and Celia could see, there were few stalls and even less shoppers wandering about. Families and groups of people who had lost their homes were sitting around the edges of the square.

At a glance, there were more homeless people than

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expected.

“And the soldiers patrolling around aren’t from this territory. They’re all wearing the uniform of the kingdom’s army. What is happening…”

It seemed like the current atmosphere of Cleia was vastly different from what Celia was familiar with. She wore a sullen expression, shaken by the change in the air of her hometown.

Firstly, it was strange for the kingdom’s army to be stationed on the land of a local lord. With the exception of during wartime, the defense of each city was entirely the responsibility of the lord. It would normally be impossible for the kingdom’s army to intervene.

“Wartime… which we aren’t in right now. Which means the army is here for some kind of investigation, or as a precaution to something…” Rio said, offering some possibilities.

“Hey, you. The man and woman over there. Remove your hoods.” A lone soldier approached them with an order.

“Huh? M-Me…?” Celia flinched in surprise, but Rio removed his own hood.

“…It’s all right. Do as he says.”

“Okay…”

Celia removed her hood nervously. Her artifact-altered blonde hair reflected in the soldier’s eyes.

“…Tch. Get out of here.” The soldier only seemed to be paying attention to hair color, as he clicked his tongue and left.

It seems like they’re searching for someone, Rio presumed from the exchange just now.

One possibility would be the lord’s daughter—the Professor. But quite some time has passed since Celia disappeared. They weren’t as strict the last time we were here, so I doubt they would carry out such a large-scale investigation at this point in time…

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Which made it highly likely they were searching for someone else.

“We may get questioned again if we put our hoods back on. I doubt we’d be suspected without cause, but it may be better to move with our faces revealed for now. Shall we leave our hoods down from here on? You may run into someone you know, so try and stay away from the noble district. I’ll go instead,” Rio suggested.

He was concerned that Celia’s above-average appearance would draw the attention of strangers, but it seemed better than being questioned by soldiers everywhere. The noble district was located deep within the city walls, so there was a low chance of encountering an acquaintance, and Celia’s hair was currently altered with a magic artifact so no one would recognize her at a glance. The risks were at an acceptable level.

“All right.”

“It doesn’t seem like the outskirts are doing well right now, so let’s head inside the walls.”

“…Right.”

And so, the two of them went inside the city walls.

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Rio entered the city walls and escorted Celia to a cozy cafe before venturing closer towards the lord’s estate alone. He looked around at the state of things for thirty minutes or so before immediately returning to Celia.

“The security around the estate looks pretty strict. As expected, it was surrounded by soldiers as well. What should we do? Should we sneak in tonight as planned?”

“…If it’s possible to sneak in, then that’s what I want to do. But there’s no need to push ourselves if there’s a high risk of being discovered,” Celia said reluctantly. Based on what she had seen of the city until now, there was definitely

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something going on that bothered her.

“It’s possible. If we use the same secret underground passageway as last time, we should be able to blend in with the darkness of the night. And, on the off chance that we’re spotted, they’re still unaware of our presence here, and there are countless escape routes at night. The risk may be a little high, but I believe it’s worth sneaking in,” Rio said, in favor of infiltration to stop Celia from showing reserve.

“Thank you. I’ll be counting on you, then, Haruto.” Celia gave a pained smile and bowed her head.

◇ ◇ ◇

Soon after, Rio and Celia went back to the stone house to pick up Aishia before returning to Cleia once more. Miharu and the spirit folk girls were to continue watching the house. Rio, Aishia, and Celia checked into a room at an inn and waited for the late hours of the night before finally commencing their attempt into Count Claire’s estate.

Campfires burned around the mansion, which was located at the top of a small hill. Soldiers patrolled the perimeter at every turn, making it impossible for a typical intruder to even get through to the garden.

However, for Rio, who could fly through the air using spirit arts, blending into the darkness of the skies that the guards weren’t watching wasn’t all that difficult. He knew his way in from the last time they came to deliver Celia’s letter after fleeing her wedding, so they arrived at the underground passageway without any issue.

After fiddling with the ground near the fountain and grabbing the hidden handle that appeared, Rio yanked the door up in a single tug. The staircase down to the passageway stood before them.

“Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

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The two of them descended down the stairs. While Rio was returning the opening to how it was before, Celia activated the magic artifacts acting as lamps along the wall.

Once the underground passageway was illuminated, they proceeded forward. After a short while, they stepped out into an open space underneath the mansion. Before them was a staircase that headed upwards, while to the left and right were several doors. Rio and Celia came to a halt before them.

“Let’s have Aishia check the state of the mansion in her spirit form. Are there any essence detection artifacts set up in your house?”

“There are, but they’re probably turned off. We do a lot of magic research using magic essence as a source of energy, so they’d be constantly activated if we kept them on.”

“I see.”

Like daughter, like family, it seemed. In which case, Aishia could just adapt with the situation as she went. But, just as Rio finished thinking, a door in the underground room suddenly opened. Rio immediately moved before Celia to cover her, putting on the hood of his black robe that he usually didn’t wear.

The person who appeared in the doorway was a beautiful girl. Her light purple hair was long and straight, her pupils were a deep violet, and her facial features held a refined elegance that was clearly of a different quality to the simplistic beauty commoner girls produced. She seemed to be similar in age to Rio.

...Princess Christina?!

It was the Beltrum Kingdom’s first princess, Christina. He had just met her at the banquet the other day, so there was no mistaking it. She was wearing lovely noble clothes that were designed around a purple base, underneath a pure white poncho. As soon as she spotted the hooded Rio in the passageway, she paled.

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“V-Vanessa!” she yelled loudly, and another woman appeared in the middle of the doorway. She seemed to be in her mid-twenties; she was wearing a knight’s uniform and had a sword sheathed at her waist.

Her name was Vanessa Emarle, and she was the knight who had once brought the orphaned Rio from the slums to the castle at swordpoint. As soon as Rio came into Vanessa’s view, a sharp look appeared on her face.

“Who goes there?” she yelled, taking on a battle stance.

What do we do?

Should they reveal themselves, or should they run for now? It was hard to make a decision on the spot. In contrast, Vanessa showed no hesitation at all as she charged at Rio.

She didn’t seem as though she intended to kill, as she didn’t draw her weapon, but a dangerous light gleamed in her eyes.

There’s no time to think.

Rio moved forward to counter immediately, and the two of them made contact. Vanessa grabbed at Rio in an attempt to suppress him.

Slap!

He parried her arm lightly. Rio proceeded to grab that arm and immobilize her movements.

“Tch!”

Vanessa shook him off her arm in a hurry, thrusting her other hand at Rio’s abdomen. But Rio threw out a punch to knock Vanessa’s fist off-course, changing her trajectory.

“Fall back to the corridor!”

“Move, Vanessa!”

Rio and Christina both yelled at once, their voices echoing in the room. Vanessa was first to react, jumping aside as Christina held her right hand up and chanted a spell.

“*Photon Projectilis*!”

A small circle floated above her palm and three bullets of light flew out in succession.

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The high speed bullets of magic energy came flying towards Rio. Even for a regular human there was a low chance of death upon impact, but each bullet had enough force to break a bone if contact was made in the right place. Rio used his spirit arts to enhance his physical body and abilities. He focused more magic essence into his hands to strengthen them. The bullets Christina released were all visible to him. His arm, shoulder, body—it was clear they were fired with the aim to seal Rio's movements.

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It would be easy enough to dodge them, but doing so would mean Celia, who was behind him, would be struck instead. Rio followed the path of the bullets and moved his hands.

“Wha…”

The photon bullets Christina had fired scattered and dispersed with the sound of an impact. It was an inhuman feat—even Celia was shocked by what happened.

Meanwhile, Christina felt a strong sense of deja-vu at the feat. The boy she had seen do the same thing at the banquet just two weeks ago was here, she realized, which was why she withdrew.

However, Vanessa suddenly kicked at the ground and approached Rio once again. Rio didn’t miss any of her movements—he was actually one step ahead as he rounded behind Vanessa in a moment and restrained her by pinning her arms behind her.

Rio then turned Vanessa around to face Christina like a shield.

“Princess Christina! Forget me and get this man!” Vanessa yelled at Christina in a panicked voice. She would probably choose death over being held hostage. It was the most admirable mindset of a knight, but—

Rio hesitated for a moment before he spoke to Christina. “…Please wait a moment. I only moved in self-defense, I have no intention of harming either of you.” He glanced back at Celia in confirmation.

Is this okay? He was asking.

The princess of her kingdom hiding in the underground rooms of her family home wasn’t a matter that could be ignored. On top of the army searching for someone in a frenzy outside, it was clear that something troublesome was going on. That was the conclusion he had reached.

Celia was already aware that the other person was Christina and nodded at Rio.

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“Please, come forward,” Rio encouraged Celia.

Click. One of the doors that had been closed until now suddenly opened, revealing two boys in their mid-teens. To Rio’s surprise, their racial features were very similar to Japanese people.

“…W-What? What’s going on…?”

The sleepy-eyed boys had yet to fully realize what was going on and looked perplexed. Rio’s eyes widened at the sight of them.

“Don’t come out. You’ll only make things more complicated,” Christina scolded the boys.

“Ah, right…”

The boys retreated back into the room, but they left the door open to watch what was going on from inside. Then, Celia walked forward past Rio.

“Princess Christina.” She knelt before her respectfully.

“…Who are you?” Christina asked in confusion.

“It’s Celia Claire. Long time no see.” Celia removed her hood and lowered her head in another show of respect.

“Professor Celia…? Is that really you…? What’s with that hair color? I thought you were missing?” When Celia revealed herself and expressed her respect, the hostility completely fell from Christina’s expression and was replaced with extreme confusion instead.

“After I broke the wedding arrangement with Charles Arbor, I hid myself from society. I waited for everything to cool down before sneaking in here through the underground passage to meet with Father again, but…” Celia explained, giving a vague version of the truth.

At that moment, Rio released Vanessa. “I apologize for my actions. Please forgive my impoliteness.”

“N-No, I was the one who attacked first. We’re, umm, not really in a position to be discovered by anyone right now. My apologies.” Despite her confusion, Vanessa returned Rio’s apology. In that time, Celia had stood.

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“So it was by your will that the wedding ceremony was suspended, Professor?” Christina asked in shock.

“Well, yes…” Celia nodded firmly to emphasize that she had left the wedding of her own will, but found herself at a loss for words when it came to explaining the events leading up to it.

“If I may be so presumptuous to speak, Your Highness, I was the one who assisted.” Rio removed his hood. He had determined with certainty from their situation that she was currently in opposition of the Duke Arbor’s faction that controlled the Beltrum Kingdom.

“So you are Sir Amakawa… But why are you with Professor Celia…?”

Christina had anticipated that Rio was Haruto Amakawa after seeing the way he deflected her photon bullet. But she couldn’t shake off her confusion, unable to understand the connection between him and Celia.

“…If I may ask, would you be willing to exchange information? I asked Haruto to bring me here in order to find out exactly what is going on in the Claire territory right now,” Celia said, launching into a simple explanation on how she got there.

“I understand. After I attended the banquet that Sir Amakawa was also present at, I returned to the Beltrum Kingdom. Then, I fled from the castle. Unfortunately, my pursuers caught up with me, preventing me from traveling any further. The only reliable ally I had was Count Claire, and I know that I must be causing him a great deal of trouble, but…” Christina frowned in frustration. Celia’s father, Count Claire, was a loyal noble of the kingdom—in other words, Duke Fontaine’s faction. They were the third faction besides Duke Arbor and Duke Huguenot, though they had the least power.

“I see… When it comes to the matter of our princess, we are happy to help.” Celia shook her head. Though it was hard

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to process the situation with such a brief explanation, they were in the same boat.

"From the bottom of my heart, I am grateful for your loyalty to the crown…" Christina said respectfully. "…By the way, how did you end up with that hair color, Professor Celia? I remember your hair being a beautiful white color before."

"Ah, umm. That's…" Celia mumbled awkwardly. Artifacts that altered hair color generally didn't exist in the Strahl region. Even a genius sorceress like herself had never seen such a thing until Rio handed it to her.

While there were many spell formulas in circulation in the Strahl region, not all of them were revealed to the public. Some were kept hidden and managed behind closed doors. Sorcery that used such spell formulas were known as secret arts, and they weren't easily leaked to the outside world. Across the thousand-year history of the Strahl region, there had even been wars between kingdoms over such secret arts.

In this regard, the artifact used to alter Celia's hair color had the same worth as a secret art, which was why she hesitated to reveal its existence—even to her own princess.

"It is altered by a magic artifact, Your Highness," Rio answered on Celia's behalf, whose loyalty had left her conflicted.

"So such artifacts exist…" Christina's eyes lit up with curiosity, but she didn't touch upon the topic any further. "Pardon me. Instead of standing around like this, why don't we move to a different location to discuss things? There is a dining room over there."

"O-Okay." Celia watched Rio's face as she nodded.

"If it would be inappropriate for me to hear the internal matters of your kingdom, I can excuse myself…" Rio voiced his concerns, unable to agree right off the bat.

"No, that won't be a problem. If anything, I'd prefer to have you present. There's no point in hiding it, so I will tell

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you this now: I currently have no power at all. That is, I'm unable to do anything without depending on those around me. That's why I'd like to ask for the assistance of the honorary knight, if possible. I am aware of how impudent I may sound, but would you at least listen to my story?" Christina asked, boldly announcing the predicament she was in as she bowed her head deeply towards Rio. It would normally be unthinkable for royalty to lower their heads at nobility, much less nobility of a foreign kingdom. That was why this action showed just how desperate Christina currently was.

"...I understand. In that case, I will sit in with you," Rio agreed.

"Thank you. Then let's move right away... Oh, I forgot about Vanessa. Vanessa, introduce yourself to Sir Amakawa first." Christina was about to head to the dining room right away when she realized Rio was still unacquainted with Vanessa.

"Yes, Your Highness. My name is Vanessa Emarle. I sincerely apologize for my actions earlier. I accompanied Princess Christina to the banquet, so I witnessed your feats first-hand. If possible, I hope you can lend that power to my princess." Vanessa bowed her head deeply at Rio.

"I cannot promise anything now, but I intend on listening to her words. If I recall, you were the one behind Princess Christina at the tea party. Is that right?"

"I am honored that you remember."

"I didn't realize you were a familiar face while we were fighting. That aside, if you are an Emarle, does that make you a relative of the King's Sword, Sir Alfred?" The King's Sword was the title given to the strongest swordsman in Beltrum Kingdom.

"...You are aware of my brother?"

"Though I haven't met him formally, when I was helping the Profe... Excuse me. When I was helping Lady Celia

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escape from her wedding ceremony, I crossed swords with Sir Alfred, who was one of the pursuers.” Rio explained their unexpected connection with a wry smile.

Vanessa stared at Rio with astonishment in her eyes. “I-Indeed, my brother mentioned such a thing… Since you successfully removed Celia from the ceremony, does that mean you accomplished your escape after crossing swords with my brother?”

“Well, yes.”

“I-I see… You must truly have impressive skills.”

“Not at all. Shall we relocate now?” Rio said.

“Please, come this way.” Vanessa led the four of them towards the door of the dining room. But, before they reached it, a boy called out to them.

“Umm… What should we do…?” One of the two Japanese-looking boys that had been completely ignored in the earlier fight raised his hand nervously.

“Who are they, Princess Christina?” Celia asked, glancing at the two boys.

“They’re… People who came to this world after being swept up in the hero summoning. How they came to this exact place is a bit of a longer story, though…” Christina pressed a hand against her head and looked perturbed.

“I see, so they’re Sir Rui’s friends,” Rio guessed immediately.

“D-Do you know Rui?” the other boy said. His words were not in Japanese, but the language of this world.

“Yes, we met at the banquet the other night…”

“I see…” A faint shadow appeared over the boy’s face.

“Is something the matter with Sir Rui?”

“N-No, nothing. Sorry for bothering you…” Though he denied the question, it was clear that something *was* the matter.

“How about the two of you introduce yourselves, as well?” Christina prompted.

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“Ah, yes! Umm…” The boy with some kind of connection to Rui nodded nervously, but seemed to be at a loss on how to introduce himself.

“I’m Saiki Rei. Ah, that’d be Rei Saiki in this world. I’m an upperclassman to this guy and Rui, but I’m not someone so important that you need to remember. Anyways, it’s nice to meet you,” the other boy said. The words he used weren’t Japanese, either, but the common tongue of Strahl.

“No, I will remember you. I’m Haruto Amakawa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” It was an amusing introduction, Rio thought as he returned the favor with a chuckle.

“Haruto Amakawa…” Hearing that name made Rei stare at Rio’s face. He probably thought the name sounded oddly Japanese.

Celia, who was familiar with Rio’s past life, could guess the reason for Rei’s suspicions. She greeted him to emphasize her presence. “Umm, I’m the daughter of the count who owns this mansion, Celia Claire. It’s nice to meet you, Rei.”

“Ah, h-hello.” Rei bobbed his head at her.

“And who are you?” Celia asked the more timid of the two boys.

“I-I’m Kouta. Kouta Murakumo. Nice to meet you.” Kouta bowed his head nervously and watched Rio and Celia’s faces. He also used the Strahl common tongue instead of Japanese.

Since they know Rui, these two are most definitely Japanese. I’m a little curious about how they learned the language of this world, though… Rio was interested in them, but now was not the time to be asking such questions.

“Hello. Nice to meet you,” Rio and Celia replied at the same time.

“We won’t keep you for any longer, then. Let’s talk again next time.” Rei urged Rio and the others to get back to their business.

“You two wait there. If you need anything, we’ll be in the

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dining room. Shall we go?”

Christina left behind instructions for Rei and Kouta before encouraging Rio, Celia, and Vanessa to move. Thus, the four of them left the two Japanese boys behind and seated themselves around the dining table.

Christina was first to open her mouth, providing the information Celia sought. “Professor, you said you wanted to meet your father—Count Claire will make his way to this basement later, before morning comes. The search party is staying inside the mansion, so it is difficult for him to move around.”

“Is that so… I was worried he’d be in the capital and we would have come here for nothing, so that’s good to hear. In that case, it seems like it’d be better to wait here until Father arrives.”

“Yes. There should still be some time until then, so I hope we can discuss various things in the meantime.”

“What shall we start with, then?”

“Let’s see. The first thing I am curious about is how the two of you fled from the castle. No matter how I looked at it, it seemed like you were abducted from that wedding ceremony…”

“I was not abducted. Like I said earlier, I asked Haruto to remove me of my own will,” Celia stressed.

“May I ask for the reason why?”

“…Embarrassing as it is to admit, I wanted to run away from my duties as a noble.”

“The duty you speak of is the political marriage with Charles Arbor—is that right?” Christina asked.

“Yes. A noblewoman will not always be able to marry the person they desire. I understand that this is the duty of all noblewomen, but I just couldn’t accept my political marriage to him,” Celia stated clearly, a dark expression on her face.

“Well, that’s only natural. I believe you made the right decision.” Christina supported Celia’s choice easily.

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Celia's eyes widened in surprise. "...It was the right decision?" she asked hesitantly.

"Indeed. Those in our positions are unable to freely choose our marriage partners. However, that is because we must marry for the sake of our families, or for our kingdoms. If a political marriage has no such benefits—or rather would bring about more evil than good—then there is no worth in adhering to such agreements," Christina said with a smile.

Hearing Christina go as far as calling the marriage "evil", Celia blinked in surprise. "...Your Highness, are you saying my political marriage with him would have been considered evil for the kingdom?" she asked.

"The existence of Charles Arbor and Duke Arbor are what is evil for the kingdom. Didn't you flee from the marriage because you thought so, too, Professor?"

"...I did feel that it was wrong. They did achieve desirable results, but the methods of the Duke Arbor family were too high-handed."

"But you didn't have confidence in your decision?"

Celia smiled weakly. "It wasn't up to me to decide whether I was right or wrong."

"Then, did you regret it? Having Sir Amakawa take you away."

She paused before shaking her head firmly. "...No, I have no regrets there."

"Then it all worked out well, no?" Christina said with a smile. "Of course, there are some nobles who would disapprove of your decision and actions. However, you thought Duke Arbor's ways were wrong. You believed it was right to leave the castle. You stuck to that belief of yours, and you have no regrets. Whether it was wrong or right doesn't matter, because the ones to determine that will come in the future—it'll be determined by us, the people who live in this kingdom... And I don't know about anyone else, but I personally support your decision, Professor."

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“I’m fortunate to have you say that, but…” Celia smiled, not sure as to how to react.

“Isn’t it more important to think about what you want to do from here, Professor Celia? The fact that you’ve returned to this mansion means that you haven’t abandoned your status as a noble of our kingdom completely, no?”

“That’s… I don’t know whether I have the right after running away…” Celia looked anxious at Christina’s question.

“Oh? If it’s a matter of being a runaway, then I’m the same as you. But just because I left the castle doesn’t mean I’m abandoning my position as royalty. What matters is what I do from here on out as a royal, and what results I leave behind. I believe everything depends on that.”

Celia’s eyes widened at Christina’s determination. “…You’re a very strong person.”

She had been thinking something similar, but she lacked the confidence and wondered if she was allowed to do so or not. In contrast to her, Christina showed strong confidence and resolution. There was no doubt she had worried over it, too. There was no way a princess could have left the castle without any concerns—doing so was a sign of utter nonchalance or ignorance, and Celia knew Christina was neither.

So why in the world would Christina leave the castle?

“May I ask a question, too?”

“Of course—go ahead,” Christina replied without falter.

“Why would you go through such dangerous lengths to leave the castle?” Celia asked.

“I did it because Father entrusted the future of the kingdom to me. I left in order to seize that future. If I remained in the capital like that, at the very least, there would be no future for me. That’s why I decided to leave the kingdom, even if it was dangerous.”

“Seize the future of the kingdom… Just what were you

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trying to do, Your Highness?" Celia asked in awe, sensing the force of Christina's determination.

"My first goal was to head to Rodania and join forces with the Restoration. After that, I'd carefully wait for the right time to move against the Beltrum government being controlled by the Arbor house and uproot their legitimacy and influence, promoting the Restoration as the legitimate power and reversing the power balance."

Christina's tone was truly dignified. But even if the Restoration had the second princess Flora and hero Hiroaki, with the current king and the hero Rui on the Beltrum government's side, there was no way the Restoration could surpass their legitimacy. The kingdom's side would be shaken if Princess Christina joined the Restoration, but it still wasn't enough to overthrow them.

"...Can you do such a thing? How...?" Celia asked, incredulous.

"I can't tell you at present, but I will be able to tell you once I reach Rodania. That's why I must leave this basement by any means necessary and head to Rodania." An unshakeable light dwelled within Christina's eyes.

It was at this moment that Rio sought permission to join the conversation. "May I ask a question, too?"

"Yes," Christina agreed.

"With all due respect, it sounds like the Arbor house has already seized power over the kingdom in every substantial way. I am curious about what more they would desire on top of that. If you have no objections, I would like to hear more regarding that," Rio asked, probing after Duke Arbor's goals.

"Sure. If Duke Huguenot is a rational and ambitious person, then Duke Arbor is an insatiable and ambitious person. He's the type of person who wants to have his cake and eat it, too, whereas Duke Huguenot won't cross that line. Can you figure out what I'm saying with this?" Christina stared at Rio closely.

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Rio answered after a faint pause. “…Duke Arbor wants the crown.”

“Exactly,” Christina nodded.

“That means the current high-ranking royal successors to the crown are a hindrance in Duke Arbor’s eyes.” That meant the existence of the Restoration that was backing the second princess Flora was probably a thorn in Duke Arbor’s side.

“Yes. If I remained in the capital like that, I believe I would have been erased sooner or later,” Christina said in a calm and gentle manner.

“H-How could he! Such an unjust act of brutality would never be accepted…!” Celia yelled in shock.

The crown of the Beltrum Kingdom was succeeded by blood—this was absolute. The next king was decided in the order of those with higher rights to succession, and the absolute condition of succession was to be a direct descendent of the king. It was impossible for someone with less right of succession to inherit the throne when someone with higher rights was present.

The current children born between King Philip the Third and his first wife Queen Beatrice were Christina and Flora, who possessed the title of First Princess and Second Princess in succession, respectively. Below them were the children born from concubines.

Duke Arbor’s youngest daughter was one of those concubines who wedded King Philip the Third, but the right of succession for her child, Loris, was rather low.

“But it can be. Legitimacy can be provided by the hero, Rui. A hero is a disciple of the Six Wise Gods, the very beings who support the power and legitimacy of the throne. It wouldn’t be impossible for him to overthrow the throne succession to hand his own grandchild the next crown. That’s why the Arbor house had been strengthening their internal influence so greedily. In order to squash those who

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may object to that legitimacy.”

“Guh…” Celia gulped involuntarily.

“But, unfortunately for him, the hero Rui was summoned alongside his sweetheart. He tried to make his granddaughter Loris approach him to be his wife, but their efforts were in vain. Furthermore, Professor Celia’s abduction sullied their presence before the general public, so their influence has waned a little. Thanks to that, I was able to move a little more than before and decided to make my escape. I owe Professor Celia and Sir Amakawa my gratitude in that regard,” Christina said, smiling. Then, she looked at Rio. “That aside… Sir Amakawa. May I ask you several questions?”

“Yes. I shall answer to the best of my ability,” Rio agreed with a light shrug.

“I appreciate that. Then, may I ask about the relationship between you and Professor Celia?”

“I owe Lady Celia my life, you could say.” There were many ways he could express his relationship with Celia, but this was probably the most convenient one to use at the moment.

“You owe her your life, hmm… Incidentally, how did you two sneak in here? The security outside should be fairly strict…” Christina asked, narrowing her eyes.

“We did exactly that—we snuck in here normally,” Rio answered easily.

“Is it possible to do such a thing…?” Christina found it unbelievable, and looked at Rio as though to say just that.

“Yes, with Lady Celia alone. We’d certainly be able to leave here, as well.”

“You sure make it sound easy, when we can’t even leave if we wanted to,” Christina said with a dry smile.

“Umm, if the search parties are focused around Cleia, does that mean your location has pretty much been revealed, Your Highness?” Celia asked.

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Christina nodded with a frown. “Most likely. It seems like Count Claire is being suspected of treason for assisting in our escape from the castle.”

“Did Father initiate your escape?”

“The king made the request of Count Claire to guide us. Leaving the capital and arriving here went smoothly enough, but our pursuers were sent here due to the suspicion on Count Claire. That was when we became unable to move further and have been hidden in this basement for several days now,” Christina said, explaining the events that had occurred until now.

A grim look appeared on Celia’s face. “…That makes sense, considering the current situation. That means this underground basement isn’t exactly safe, either.”

“Yes. The count is doing his best feigning ignorance, but it seems like he’s quite heavily suspected and it won’t be long until they run out of patience and forcefully conduct their search here. That’s why we were planning an all-or-nothing attempt to escape…”

“Which was when we appeared.”

“Exactly,” Christina nodded, watching Rio. Then, she bowed her head deeply. “Sir Amakawa. I am aware that this is a most impudent and reckless request, but could you lend me your power in order to escape this predicament? If I can overcome this desperate situation, I vow to give you the greatest reward in my power…”

“…What are you asking for, specifically?”

“To assist our escape from this mansion and escort us from Cleia to Rodania.”

“Your means of travel is by land—in other words, on foot, is that correct? And the subjects you want me to escort will be yourself, Vanessa, and Rei and Kouta in the other room,” Rio said, confirming the conditions without promising anything.

“Yes.”

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“Even if we took the shortest route, it would take two weeks to reach the boundaries of the Restoration’s influence. Duke Arbor would have predicted your target destination of the Restoration already, making it necessary to make detours around every road and checkpoint there. Your Highness has light purple hair that stands out, and the two boys in the other room have black hair and unique features, too. There must be a search party in every city on the lookout for that, so moving in such numbers would be fairly difficult…”

Actually, most people would be stuck just trying to escape from this mansion itself. That was why Christina was hiding in the basement with no way out, after all.

“…Yes.” Christina nodded with a frown.

“I understand. If you accept all of the conditions I present to you under contract, then I shall accept your request,” Rio said eventually, a hand pressed to his mouth in thought.

“…Really?” Christina’s eyes filled with hope.

“Yes. Even if I refused, Lady Celia would have ended up accepting, anyway. She isn’t the type of person to abandon her kingdom’s princess in such a predicament, after all,” Rio chuckled, looking at Celia.

“Ah, umm…”

Celia, who had held her silence until now, made an uncomfortable face at having her sentiments utterly seen through.

“…I see. And what are your conditions, Sir Amakawa?” Christina smiled faintly as she asked for Rio’s conditions.

“Setting the minor details aside, I only have one main request: your complete support of Lady Celia if she ever decides to return to the kingdom as a noble. She should obviously face no repercussions for slipping away from the wedding ceremony, and you should make any and all necessary arrangements if trouble ever comes her way,” Rio said, entrusting the First Princess Christina to set the table

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for Celia's return to nobility.

"For someone as great as Professor Celia, I would have happily done so even without being asked to..." Christina blinked as though to ask whether that much was enough.

"W-What are you saying?!" Celia asked Rio in shock.

"Whether you return as a noble or not is your choice, but it doesn't hurt to secure better conditions for your options, don't you think?" Rio grinned impishly.

Celia struggled to find her words. "Uh... Oh, fine. Thank you..." She ducked her face and thanked him shyly. Just then, a rumbling of something moving could be heard outside the dining room. It was followed by the sound of a buzzer ringing twice.

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“It seems Count Claire has descended the stairs.” Vanessa immediately moved to open the dining room door.

“Oh, so you were in the dining room. And Princess Christina is here, too, perfect. I don’t have much time, so I shall give my report quickly—Hmm? Who’s that over there…?”

The voice of a dandy middle-aged man came from the other side of the door. Count Claire spotted Vanessa inside the room and briskly shuffled inside, coming to a sudden stop when he spotted Rio and Celia seated across from Christina.

Celia greeted her father a little awkwardly. “Ahaha. Long time no see, Father. Oh, right…”

She realized her hair color had been altered and removed the artifact, changing her hair back to normal. Celia’s father, Roland Claire, gazed upon her in a daze.

“C…Celia?! Why are you here?!” he shouted hysterically.

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Interlude: The Pursuers

While Rio and Celia were walking around the city of Cleia during the day, Count Claire's estate was welcoming some honored guests.

A dozen or so men walked down the hallway. In the lead was the man formerly engaged to Celia, her ex-fiance Charles Arbor. Immediately behind him was Beltrum Kingdom's strongest swordsman, the King's Sword Alfred Emarle, and the hero Shigekura Rui. Further behind them were Charles' knight subordinates.

"Has Princess Christina still yet to be found?!" Charles yelled in irritation as he threw open the doors of the room acting as the headquarters of the search party set up in the mansion.

"S-Sir Charles! I see you have made the long journey from the capital. I apologize for not coming to meet you!" The knight in charge of the search party had been seated at the desk glaring at documents, but he leaped to his feet in a hurry to salute them.

"Forget that. Where's Princess Christina?"

"S-Sir! The search is ongoing, but we are yet to find her!"

"You better be searching properly."

"O-Of course, Sir!"

"And Count Claire?"

"He insists that he doesn't know anything. We've placed him under house arrest to monitor him, and he hasn't shown any suspicious movements so far. Are you sure Princess Christina came this way?"

"I am. Not only is Cleia en route from the capital to the Restoration headquarters in Rodania, Count Claire is the

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only noble on the side of the crown who would assist the princess. He's the only noble of that faction who departed from the capital at the same time as her disappearance, too," Charles stated in irritation.

"However, if that were the case, she may have already departed from the city…"

"That's why we have personnel divided to all the nearby cities and roads. And, even if she has left the city already, we need to obtain evidence of Count Claire's collaboration."

"There's still the possibility that Count Claire really wasn't involved…"

"…Are you a fool?" Charles asked, briskly closing in on the search party captain.

"The First Princess vanished from the capital. Who will take responsibility for that? Hmm? Will it be you? Are you the mastermind behind it?" he whispered in his ear.

"…N-No, Sir." The search party captain shook his head fearfully.

"Then gather all the carpenters in the city here tomorrow," Charles suddenly said.

"…Huh?" The captain was stunned, unable to understand the reason why carpenters needed to be summoned.

"They'll be used to threaten the count. Just summon them here. I'll speak to Count Claire myself," Charles said with a twisted grin.

"Y-Yes, Sir! Understood!"

"Good reply. Now, rejoice." Charles turned around and introduced Rui and Alfred standing behind him. "Some reliable figures will be cooperating with the search party. This is our kingdom's hero, Sir Rui Shigekura, and the King's Sword, Alfred. Though it pains me to cause such trouble for Sir Rui like this…" He pressed his hand against his forehead, expressing his grief for making Rui assist them.

"My friend and upperclassman disappeared, as well, so

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I'm more than happy to help out. I look forward to working with you." Rui pasted a cheerful smile on his face as he greeted the search party captain.

"I-It's an honor, Sir!" The knight captain saluted nervously.

"And so, Sir Rui, you will be moving in a pair with Alfred for the search party. You may also use my other personnel if needed."

"Sure, leave it to me." Rui nodded easily.

"Alfred, protect Sir Rui with your life, got it? Your little sister is complicit in this. You must take your own share of responsibility." Charles narrowed his eyes at Alfred threateningly.

"...I am aware." Alfred nodded quietly. Just then, a knock sounded on the door of the search party headquarters.

"Who is it? Enter," Charles turned to the door and said.

One of the guard soldiers entered the room, saluting them once before opening his mouth to pass on a message.

"Sir Charles, someone identifying themselves as your old friend Jean Bernard has arrived. What would you like to do?"

"...Jean Bernard? W-What? Why... N-No, lead him to a room immediately. Treat him with respect. I shall head there immediately." At Charles' order, the knight saluted once more before departing quickly.

"Who is that? I haven't heard that name before," Alfred immediately inquired.

"It was mentioned already. He's my friend. One I have known for a long time."

"Is this the time to be meeting with old friends? How did he know you were here when we only just arrived ourselves?"

"He must have been in this city by coincidence and witnessed us entering the estate. I cannot keep him waiting, so I will go now. Sir Rui, please excuse me," Charles said,

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immediately turning on his heel and leaving the room.

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Charles immediately moved to the drawing room to wait for Jean Bernard's arrival. Less than a minute later, his arrival was announced.

"Jean Bernard is here."

"Let him through. Don't let anyone else inside," Charles ordered.

Reiss soon entered the room. "Why, if it isn't Sir Charles. We just met at the banquet the other day, but how have you been faring since then?" He gave a friendly smile as he bowed politely.

"...Should I be referring to you as Lord Bernard right now, Lord Reiss? How did you know I was in this city?" Charles asked, wanting to know the details of why Reiss was here.

"Oh, no—I was simply tracking the movements of someone I'm curious about and ended up in this city. I noticed a rather heavy atmosphere, then found you in the midst of it, so I thought I'd at least say hello. I named myself Jean Bernard, as the Proxia Empire ambassador being here would probably cause a bit of a stir and arouse needless suspicions," Reiss said, smiling with profound meaning.

"Is that so? What a coincidence it was, then." Charles frowned regrettably. "I would love to give you a proper welcome, but, as you can see, we're all a little busy right now."

"Keep it between you and me; if you're facing some kind of trouble, I can offer my support. Did something happen?" Reiss asked with a worried expression.

"The truth is... Well, we suspect a felon has concealed themselves in this city, so we're investigating that." Charles was about to explain the situation in detail, but stopped with just a vague description instead. No matter how much he

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trusted the other man, he hesitated to tell a foreigner that the princess escaped her supervision in the castle.

“Oh my, that sounds dangerous, indeed. If you are moving directly, then that felon must have committed a grave sin.”

“Yes, well. I wouldn’t describe them as villainous, but they are cunning,” Charles said, thinking of Christina.

“I see… Well, I shouldn’t interfere with the matter of another kingdom too much. It wouldn’t do for me to hinder you from your duties any longer, so I shall excuse myself now.” Reiss seemed to read the room and offered.

“My apologies. I must meet with Count Claire now. If you are staying inside the city, I can have a guest room prepared for you…”

“No, I have already secured lodgings, so there’s no need to concern yourself,” Reiss said, standing up.

“I see… I’m truly regretful that I couldn’t offer better hospitality. Let us speak more leisurely the next time we meet.”

“Yes, gladly. Now if you would excuse me.” Reiss nodded with an empty smile and left the room.

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Chapter 6: Escape

“S… Sweet Celia?! Why are you here?!” Roland Claire shouted at the sight of his daughter in the hidden basement of his home. Her being here was truly right out of the blue.

S-Sweet Celia? For a moment, Rio doubted his ears.

“Father, I asked you to stop calling me that…” Celia said to Roland with a strained smile. He spread his arms and hugged her.

“Have you been well? I was delighted to find your letter and hear that you were safe after you were taken away from the wedding, but I worried so much.”

“I’m very sorry for doing such a thing without informing you…”

“No, you did the right thing. If I had to give that piece of shit your hand in marriage, I’d rather you remained unmarried for the rest of your life!” Roland stressed. It seemed like he doted on his daughter quite a bit. Roland was slender and on the slightly smaller side, but his dignity and spirit made him seem like a youthful middle-aged man. However, he appeared rather sloppy at the moment.

“Umm, Father. We’re standing front of Princess Christina, so please watch what you do and say,” Celia said with a strained expression.

“O-Oh, that’s right. Hmm. I had information to pass on to the princess, too, but…” Roland looked conflicted. He surely had many things he wanted to ask Celia, such as where she went after she left the castle, and what she was doing here now…

“If you’re really short on time, please speak with Professor Celia first. It’s your long-awaited reunion, after all,”

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Christina said, understanding how Roland must be feeling.

After all his hesitation, Roland made a decision. "...No, I shall make my report to you first, Your Highness."

The situation must be dire, Christina realized, causing her to stiffen.

"I understand. It doesn't seem like it'll be good news, but please let me hear it."

"Yes. The truth is, the capital has sent additional search teams, and they're being led by Charles Arbor. A distrustful and despicable man who uses everything within his means. He deemed the mansion to be the most suspicious location and has called for all the city's carpenters to gather tomorrow and dismantle my house in search of hidden rooms. He's even prepared a seizure warrant from His Majesty to make sure I cannot refuse. There's absolutely no time left," Roland explained as he watched Celia with a conflicted expression. Celia looked pained to hear that Charles was so close by.

Christina looked at Rio imploringly. "...Sir Amakawa. Is it possible to leave tonight?"

"It is. There's no other time than tonight to leave, it seems," Rio answered immediately.

"...Your Highness, who is this boy?" Roland looked at Rio and tilted his head.

"He's the newly-appointed honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom, Sir Haruto Amakawa."

"Honorary knight? At such a young age? But what is a noble of Galarc doing here...?"

"Sir Amakawa is the one who brought Professor Celia to this underground room," Christina explained.

"W-What? How did you get around all the security guards outside...? No, wait. If you're the one who brought Celia here, then are you...?" Roland looked at Rio in surprise.

"I am also the one who took Lady Celia from her wedding," Rio stated.

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“O-Oh my… H-Hmm.” Roland stared closely at Rio’s face and hummed.

“Father, like I previously wrote in the letter I left here, I was the one who decided to flee from that wedding. Haruto simply granted me that wish.” Celia emphasized that it was her own intention to run away from the wedding ceremony, shifting all of the responsibility away from Rio.

“…I know that. So you’re the one who saved Celia. Sir Haruto Amakawa, please allow me to thank you.” Roland placed his right hand over his chest and bowed his head at Rio.

“No, I was the one who pushed her into questioning whether she wanted to be married in such a way. I apologize for causing you any degree of concern.” Rio bowed his head back in apology.

“I thought my heart would stop after she was kidnapped, but it resulted in her escape from marrying Charles, I suppose. I’ll let you off with a single blow from the fire magic *Ignium*,” Roland stated with a refreshing smile.

“Father! Please don’t misunderstand. I was the one who decided to leave the castle. The responsibility is on me, not Haruto. If you wish to blame anyone, blame me. I’m the one at fault!” Celia pouted in objection.

“No, you can never be wrong!” Roland denied immediately.

“Then you’re not wrong, either, right?” Celia confirmed.

“But of course!” Roland nodded, beaming with his entire face.

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“Now that the suspicion on Sir Amakawa has been cleared up, shall we move onto discussing the escape? Although the entire plan is up to him…” Christina chuckled.

“The first step is to relocate from the basement to the surface, but this shouldn’t be done with everyone in a single trip. There are too many at risk of standing out. It would be one thing if you were seen in the city, but if Your Highness is spotted on the estate grounds, it’d be evident you were sheltered here. Even Count Clare wouldn’t be able to excuse himself from that, correct?” Rio looked at Roland and asked.

“Hmm… Even being seen inside the city is crossing the line, but it is certainly more excusable than being found in the estate,” Roland said thoughtfully.

“Which means that even if the risk of being spotted is small, I should avoid taking you all out of here one by one. The more often I go in and out, the greater the risk of discovery will be—and if I am spotted, I will have to flee, making it hard to re-enter. I may have to abandon those left behind that way.”

“Then what can we do…?” asked Christina. What other method could there be?

“In this situation, the best way to manage the risk is for me to leave the basement first and cause a commotion elsewhere as bait. After all the security guards are drawn to me, Your Highness and the others can take that chance to escape. How does that sound? I’ll provide enough magic artifacts to alter everyone’s hair colors, so please use them.” Rio suggested the safest plan. If there were too many people on the estate grounds to escape easily, then they should simply reduce the number of personnel.

Christina gulped. “…Is that okay? Wouldn’t it be too much of a burden on you?”

Considering how heavy the air in the city was right now, causing such a commotion would normally be considered suicide.

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“Yes. This amount of security is nothing compared to when I took Lady Celia away from her wedding in the Beltrum Kingdom’s capital,” Rio answered completely calmly.

“Pff, haha! Oh, excuse me. This would normally be a role assigned to a sacrificial pawn, yet you have a tremendous amount of persuasive power.” Roland laughed heartily.

“I’m honored. But the security guards may get hurt, and the houses in the city may get damaged this way…”

“Fair enough. I shall close my eyes to such damage to the city. However, I hope you can avoid hurting the citizens, if possible.”

“Understood. I will strive to avoid causing harm to any non-combatants. Now, let’s go over the details closely, so that nothing is left to chance. It would be of great help if you have a map of the city—even a rough one will do.”

“I have one in my head. I shall draw it for you,” said Roland, being the lord of the area.

“Please,” Rio said. Then he secretly addressed Aishia, who had accompanied them in her spirit form.

Aishia, I have a favor to ask.

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They spent half an hour or so going over the plan for escape.

“…I’ll be leaving with the princess, then, Father.”

“Yes—take care of yourself. Although I suppose there’s no need for me to worry, considering how skilled Haruto is.”

“Yes. I’ve lived a very peaceful, enjoyable life since leaving the castle with Haruto. But that’s why I continued to worry, deep down inside… I wondered if I was really allowed to be so happy after making you and the others worry so much. I unreasonably asked Haruto to bring me here in search of that answer, although it ended up in more trouble for him…”

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“I see… After this situation passes, I’d love to sit down with you two to talk. I must thank him for plenty of things, too.” Roland’s face softened at the way Celia spoke apologetically.

“Of course. I’m going to talk to Haruto a bit before we leave.”

“Off you go, then.” Roland sent Celia off.

“Hey, Haruto.”

“Is something the matter, Lady Celia?”

“The way you call me Lady Celia is embarrassing. Just call me Celia,” Celia said with a frown.

“No—I cannot refer to an unmarried noblewoman without her title in public,” Rio said. He couldn’t call her “Professor”, either, so he had settled with calling her Lady.

“…Fine, whatever. More importantly, I wanted to apologize. I placed more burdens on you before I even realized it myself,” Celia said, her face twisting with regret.

Rio shook his head with a faint smile. “That’s not true. I’m doing whatever I like, because I’m the one that wants to return my favor to you.”

“I’m honored to hear you say that, but… You know the things I did for you were barely anything at all? You’ve done so much for me, I’m the one unable to return the favor for it all. That’s why I want to thank you. For everything—always,” Celia said apologetically.

“No, I should be saying that.” Rio smiled gently at Celia in return.

Haruto, preparations are done. Ready whenever, Aishia’s voice echoed in his head.

Got it. I’ll contact you when I’m ready, so please begin.

Okay.

“Now, the night will end if we spend too much time here, so let’s get going soon.”

“…Yeah.”

They started down the corridor to the garden. Other than

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Christina, Vanessa, and Roland, Rei and Kouta were waiting there, too.

"We're counting on you, Sir Amakawa," Christina said, bowing her head. Vanessa, Rei, and Kouta followed her lead.

"Yes. Everything will be fine, as long as we move according to the plan. I'll leave you to guard them, Miss Vanessa," Rio said, looking at Vanessa.

"Got it. I am no match for you, but I will do my best," she nodded deeply.

"Sir Amakawa… No, Haruto," Roland addressed Rio with a strange look.

"Yes, what is it?" Rio replied, standing slightly on guard.

"I'm placing my trust in you… Please protect Celia," Roland said, bowing his head.

"I would have done so anyway," Rio chuckled, nodding firmly. It was so natural, he didn't need to be told to do so. However, he was pleased to hear Celia's father ask that of him.

"…I see. Then, please accept this." Roland offered a small pouch that was packed full.

"What is this?"

"It contains traveling funds. You'll need to restock on your journey, no? You may pocket the remainder as your reward. I know it isn't anywhere near the worth of this job, but we can arrange something further on another day, after you return alive."

"No, this is… I cannot accept something like this." Rio refused to accept Roland's offering with a frown.

"It's fine, just take it. At least let me shoulder the expenses of your travel." Roland forced Rio to hold the pouch.

"…I will hand the leftovers to Lady Celia, then."

"Hehe, it seems you're a rather stubborn one. You show promise for a youth. I would have loved to have a drink or two with you, but there's no time. Better get going."

"Yes. Please excuse me… We'll be leaving now."

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With those words, Rio ascended the stairs up to the estate garden. He cracked open the door in the roof and searched the surroundings with his spirit arts. Once he confirmed there was no one nearby, he opened the door fully and shot out swiftly.

He then weaved his way through the guards patrolling the garden, moving with splendid movements and leaping over the high fence around the estate like an acrobat.

Less than a few minutes later, in skies far above the city away from Count Claire's mansion, a blast of light exploded violently.

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In a square within Cleia, an explosion suddenly reverberated through the dark and empty area. In the next moment, a blast of light was fired into the sky above the square, lighting up the city as though it were day.

"What happened?!" Army soldiers patrolling the city nearby came running to the square.

"There are four people over there!"

"What?" Their attention immediately gathered on the four figures in the square. They were illuminated by the blast of light in the air, making them easy to spot.

Sure enough, there were the people the soldiers were in search of—that is, two women with the characteristics of Christina and Vanessa. The other two wore hoods and covered their entire bodies, making it hard to identify their gender.

"Purple hair... It's Princess Christina!"

"The other has a sword. It's the knight, Vanessa Emarle!" the soldiers shouted.

"W-Why are they standing so boldly out in the open..." Some people were confused by the sight.

"W-Wait! Ah, no—hold it right there!"

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The group of four selected a street that was empty of soldiers and ran away from the square. The soldiers yelled after them, but there was no way they would stop. The light blast fired into the air rapidly faded away, sinking the surroundings back into darkness.

“R-Reinforcements! Call for reinforcements from headquarters! Send people to the gates, too!”

“Y-Yes sir!”

An older soldier gave orders quickly, making the younger soldiers move in a panic. Watching them from the rooftop of a nearby house was the group of four that had supposedly ran from the square earlier.

Aishia, until I give the signal, keep showing yourselves here and there and lead the soldiers to the northern block.

One person from the group, a girl with purple colored haired, heard Rio’s voice in her head. The girl was none other than Aishia, and she had used spirit arts to temporarily change the color of her hair to a lavender hue.

Got it, Aishia answered in her calm voice.

“Let’s go,” she said to the three others, and leapt from the roof to the street.

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Some time after that—

“What?! Princess Christina was spotted in a square in the civilian district?!”

The Count Claire estate was within the noble district. Charles had been sleeping in the honored guest building when he was woken and given an unexpected report while still in his pajamas.

“Y-Yes, sir! A ball of light suddenly appeared in the sky and the soldiers who went running to investigate spotted a group of four people similar to the targets. They’re currently fleeing towards the north,” the soldier who came to make the

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report explained in a rush.

"W-Where's Count Claire?!"

"On the premises. He's seeking an explanation for this commotion."

"But… that can't be…" Charles' eyes widened in shock.

I figured he would take action if I put pressure on him with an unreasonable order, but… He wasn't sheltering them in the mansion, then?! Why are they in the civilian district?!

If Christina had been hidden in the civilian district, then there would have been no way for her to contact Count Claire under house arrest in the noble district. No, it was possible to make contact through magic artifacts, but using one would cause the message to be sent to all other artifacts within range. They couldn't be used to pass confidential messages to each other.

"What are your orders? We only have a minimal amount of personnel in the civilian district apart from the gate, and they've sent a request for backup." The soldier making the report sought further orders in a panic.

"Tch, go north! Mobilize all the personnel in the mansion and noble district, and send them to the civilian district! Seal off the area, make sure they don't get away! Capture them at all costs!" Charles yelled his orders.

As long as he could capture them, he had countless ways of obtaining testimony. If he let them get away, there would be no definitive proof left.

"Understood!" the soldier replied, rushing out of the room to pass on the orders. In his place, Rui and Alfred appeared.

"What on earth is happening, Charles?" Alfred asked first.

"T-They're north! Princess Christina is in the northern block! Witnesses have spotted a group of four, hurry up and seize them! Don't let them get away! I'll change first before I head out with my subordinates, too!" Charles ordered Alfred.

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“Let’s go!” Rui replied immediately, running out of the room. Alfred sighed before following Rui towards the northern block of the city.

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At the same time, elsewhere in the civilian district of the city…

Along the inside of the city walls of the northern block, Rio ran along the rooftops with his physical body enhanced.

“Hurry! They shouldn’t have gone far yet. They may try to escape through the north gate. Search the area thoroughly!”

The streets were packed with soldiers running around in a fluster. They had been lured by the diversion Aishia created, gathering a large number of soldiers to the northern block.

Rio spotted some soldiers moving in pairs and leaped with great force. He cleverly manipulated his wind spirit arts to erase the sound of his landing and dealt the first blow to the soldiers before they noticed his presence.

“Gwah!”

“Gah!”

The two soldiers were instantly knocked out and fell to the ground. The iron batons they were equipped with rolled beside them. Rio picked up a baton and held it in his right hand, swinging it a few times to familiarize himself with the feeling. After his hand grew familiar with the baton, he leaped onto the rooftops once again.

After that, he proceeded to knock out small groups of soldiers moving together to increase the commotion, then headed to the north gate.

Aishia, I’m going to defeat the northern gatekeepers and open the gate. You should escape through the north gate and make sure people see you. That’s the end of your job, he ordered Aishia nearby.

Got it, Aishia replied immediately. Wary of an escape

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through the north gate, the area before the gate was filled with many soldiers. However—

All right, I'm going to attack the gate now, Rio declared as he watched the ten soldiers near the gate. He ran towards the gate with no hesitation whatsoever, holding the fingers of his right hand up like a gun.

The next moment, bullets of light from *Photon Projectilis* were fired. The projectiles moved as though they were being sucked towards the bodies of the soldiers.

"Guh!"

"Argh?!"

"Gah!"

"Ugh…"

There was no way for them to evade the rapid light bullets in the dark, so the soldiers cried out one after another as they were blown away.

"Hah, hah… What…?"

The soldiers had no idea what had just happened and glanced around.

"Gah!"

Nine shots were fired in the time it took Rio to reach the last person standing. All of them struck the bodies of the soldiers and sent them flying.

"Eek! Uuh…"

He revealed himself to the last remaining person and swung the baton. A dull *thunk* rang out before the soldier collapsed to the ground.

The gate controls must be inside the office.

Rio left the ten unconscious soldiers behind and headed for the door to the office. He walked inside as though he was opening his own front door.

Another soldier was on standby inside, but he was also knocked out swiftly before Rio fiddled with the gate controls. After a moment, the north gate started creaking open. The noise in the vicinity increased immediately at the sound of

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the gate opening.

A group of four figures arrived before the gate. Soldiers from elsewhere closed in on the gate just as it was about to open fully.

“H-Hey, the gate’s opening!”

“The gatekeepers are down. They must be right here! It’s Princess Christina!”

The soldiers yelled in a fluster when they spotted the group of four, but at the same time, the north gate completely opened, allowing the group to run through it. Grain farms were located outside the north and south gates, so the four continued charging down the road until they disappeared into the night.

That’s enough, Aishia. Thank you. I’ll be heading to the south gate now. I’ll contact you when it’s over.

Rio had climbed above the gate at some point and was speaking to Aishia through their telepathic link. Two soldiers were knocked out beside him.

Okay, I got it.

Aishia came to a stop several hundred meters down the road. The other three running beside her also halted.

“Is this enough, Lady Aishia?” the woman with the sword at her waist asked.

“Yup. Our job ends here. Haruto is heading to the south gate,” Aishia replied.

“Phew, that was nerve wracking,” one hooded person said as they revealed their face. It was Orphia. Her long high elf ears had been transformed with an artifact, but her hair color was the same as usual.

“It was quite a thrilling experience.” The other hooded person also lowered their hood. It was the elder dwarf, Alma. Like Orphia, her characteristic ears had been hidden, but her hair color was natural.

“Celia was meant to escape through the south gate to make it look like she went south, then head towards the east,

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right? Something might still come up, so shall we go around the city and keep an eye out on the situation?" The woman with the sword—Sara, pretending to be Vanessa—said. She wasn't wearing a hood, but her silver werewolf ears had been transformed and her hair was altered to the same color as Vanessa's.

"Yup, let's do that," Aishia nodded.

Thus, the four of them headed for the south gate just in case.

◇ ◇ ◇

Far above the skies of the city, there was a man overlooking the series of events happening below. It was Reiss. He had been observing Rio and the others ever since the flash of light was shot into the air and caused a commotion in the city. His eyes tracked their locations closely, as though he could see right through the darkness.

"I see, I see. So they're pretending to flee through the north road while actually heading out the south gate where the security lightened. What a wonderful plan," Reiss said to himself in awe, looking down at Rio leaping from rooftop to rooftop. A group of four people were sneaking around near the gate— it was Christina and the others.

Hmm, if the one on the run is Princess Christina, then it would be troublesome if the main Beltrum government lost any further power. There's no helping it, then.

Reiss sighed quietly and began his descent. Once he landed near the north gate, he approached a few soldiers.

"Excuse me," he began.

"Who is it? Why are you sneaking around?!" The soldiers lifted their weapons and demanded Reiss identify himself.

"Why, with the racket you're all making, I couldn't help but wake up and check on what was going on outside. There are other people staring out of their windows, too—can't you

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see?” Reiss said, looking around at the houses nearby. Indeed, there were several people peeking out of their windows to watch the situation.

“…Tch. You’re in the way. Go home.” The soldier clicked his tongue and shooed Reiss away.

“Now, now, don’t be like that. I came with what might be useful information for you.”

“What…? Then just say it already.”

“I saw a suspicious group of four heading towards the south, and was wondering if it was related to this incident going on now,” Reiss said, grinning.

The soldiers froze. “…A group of four, you say?”

“Yes, that’s right. They were going down the road towards the south gate. That was all I had to say, so if you would excuse me now,” Reiss said, departing promptly. Then, as though to replace him, two new people approached the area before the north gate. It was Rui and Alfred.

“I’m the commander of the Beltrum Kingdom’s Royal Guard, Alfred Emarle. Someone please explain what’s going on here.”

◇ ◇ ◇

While the city was in an uproar, Celia and the others snuck out of the underground basement, climbed over the wall, and safely escaped Count Claire’s estate. They had now arrived near the south gate and were hiding in the shadows.

“There are gatekeepers, but I never expected to get this close to the gate so easily. He really is skilled…” Christina muttered in awe as she watched the soldiers patrolling the south gate. They had barely encountered any from the Claire estate to this point, moving easily despite several of their party being inexperienced in any kind of stealth tactics. She couldn’t help but smile at how everything went better than she could have ever imagined.

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“Haruto always does his work reliably,” Celia said proudly.

Christina looked at her curiously. “...You seem to trust him a lot.”

“I have no reason not to.” Celia smiled in embarrassment.

Who is Sir Amakawa, really? All I know about him is that he was recently appointed as an honorary knight of Galarc. If he’s acquainted with Professor Celia, then perhaps he’s a former noble...?

Christina was extremely curious about his history. She couldn’t imagine someone as capable as him had gone completely unknown until now. Celia could possibly provide some answers, but it hadn’t been long since they met, and prying into such things in the midst of this situation would be rather impolite.

They’d see each other every day on their journey, so there would be many more opportunities to talk in the future. It would be foolish to talk too much now and be discovered by someone, so she decided to wait until Rio arrived, as planned.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“...!”

A voice suddenly spoke up behind them. Everyone in Christina’s party flinched and turned back to see Rio standing in his black robe.

“I didn’t notice you at all. What splendid footwork. You even caught Vanessa by surprise...” Christina commented in awe. Vanessa frowned, a little upset.

“I apologize for surprising you,” Rio said awkwardly.

“No, it’s rather reassuring. Now, is there a way of getting past this gate?”

The wall surrounding the city was easily ten meters tall. It wasn’t a height they could jump over even with *Augendae Corporis*, so they had to open the gate to get outside.

However, there were five guards standing before the gate.

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“We’ll charge through from the front. There are fewer guards than at the north gate, so it’ll be over quickly.”

“…Then, if you could, please.”

“Yes, leave it to me.” Rio nodded, then walked off as though he were leaving for your everyday shopping trip.

“Um, wait…”

“Haruto will be fine.”

His actions were so bold, Christina missed her chance to speak up. But Celia immediately gave her stamp of approval, prompting Christina to swallow nervously and stand back to watch.

Then, Rio suddenly accelerated and closed in on the south gate. Christina lost sight of him in an instant, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Ugh…”

As soon as Rio closed in on a guard, he struck his elbow into their stomach.

“Gah!”

“Ugh!”

He twisted his body and roundhouse kicked two guards, sending them flying. Three of the guards had been knocked out in an instant.

“Who the hell are you…?!”

One of the remaining guards finally noticed Rio’s arrival, but he was kneed in the abdomen and sent flying, too. His strength drained from him, and he collapsed on the ground.

The final gatekeeper watched the scene in a daze.

“Y-You bastar… Gah!”

Before he could finish yelling, a palm was rammed into his torso, sending him flying. As a result, the five guards were knocked out in only a few seconds. Christina and the others had watched on from the shadows.

“Ah…”

They were at a complete loss for words.

“He’s strong…”

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“Just who is he…”

Rei and Kouta muttered in shock.

Rio entered the office and confirmed there were no guards around before taking over the gate controls. He soon left the room and waved the others over.

“H-Hey! Why is the gate open?!” The guards on top of the wall noticed the gate opening and started to make a fuss. In the time that Christina and the others took to make their way to the gate, Rio easily leaped up onto the ten-meter wall and knocked out the two soldiers there. Then he leaped down to the ground again.

“It’s like there’s no security at all when he’s here…” Christina found herself smiling at how ridiculously skillful he was.

“The gate will open fully in the next ten seconds. Activate your physical ability enchantments with your magic or magic artifacts, then run through the gate at full speed on my signal.” The loud rumble of the gate opening had already echoed through their surroundings, so Rio explained things in a loud voice.

“…Understood.” The party nodded their heads firmly.

“You two take these swords. Use them to protect yourselves if the time comes.” Rio took two sheathed swords from the gatekeepers and handed them to the two black-haired Japanese boys.

“O-Okay…” They had probably never killed anyone before; the boys accepted the swords with stiff expressions. Eventually, the gate fully opened.

“Go! Now!”

At Rio’s command, Christina and the others started running. Rio followed them in the rear, and six sets of footsteps echoed through the farmlands.

Unfortunately, their timing wasn’t the best, as the sun was beginning to rise. The eastern sky was starting to lighten faintly. Even worse, wheat fields grew outside of the south

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gate, and it was currently the season just before seeds were to be sowed. The fields were flat and open, making it easy for any pursuers to spot them immediately.

No matter how much their abilities were enhanced with magic or sorcery, their base stamina hadn't been improved. Rio and Vanessa trained their bodies regularly, but the others would gradually become more exhausted and run out of steam.

The soldiers were probably aware that the south gate was open already, and now that it was getting lighter outside, the pursuers would probably follow them out of the city, as they could use horses and flying mounts in the light.

I'll stay here and buy some more time, just in case.

Having decided that, Rio called out to Christina. "I'm going to stop the pursuers. Let's meet up before the first town down the south road at noon. There should be a small side road that leads to a spring. Vanessa, please protect everyone."

"Got it!" Vanessa replied promptly. The other four had their hands full with running and couldn't reply. Among them, Christina seemed to be having the easiest time.

"Take care!" Rio said, coming to a stop and turning around.

"H-Haruto... Y-You have to show up at the rendezvous point, no matter what! Hah... hah... Please! If you don't, I'll... hah..." Celia's voice could be heard from behind him—she was out of breath and yelling desperately. Rio replied with a wave of his right hand and started off back towards the city.

Not long after, he spotted knights bursting out of the south gate. There were ten of them.

Knights, huh?

Rio noticed that they were all wearing knight uniforms. The capabilities of their trained bodies had been increased to their limits through physical ability enhancements via magic and magic artifacts.

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Naturally, career soldiers that had undergone training could draw out far more of their stamina than those who weren't, so if they'd continued running like this, they would have eventually caught up to Celia and the others.

Looks like staying back was the right choice, Rio thought, pulling his hood lower over his face. He retrieved two daggers and several throwing knives from his Time-Space Cache and equipped them. Before long, the knights arrived before Rio.

"Halt!" The knight in the lead ordered the others.

"..." Rio's eyes widened faintly under his hood. Their leader was Charles Arbor.

"It seems like it was the right choice for me to lead the rear guard and check on the sound of the south gate opening myself. I really lucked out," Charles said with a savage sneer. "Who the hell are you?! What are you doing here? Remove your hood!" he demanded in a threatening voice.

"...Why should I answer you?" Rio replied provocatively, refusing to answer the question.

"What did you just say? Do you have a death wish?" Charles looked down at Rio in contempt. "Whatever. I'll show you a world of pain to where you'll surely beg me for death. Now would be the time to speak up."

"I have nothing to say to you." Rio pointed his dagger at the sadistically-grinning man to challenge him. A wrinkle appeared in Charles' brow.

"...Do it." He ordered the battle to commence in a cold voice. The knights behind him all moved at once.

Rio lowered his stance and kicked off from the ground. He charged into the knights as he reached into his breast pocket with his left hand, taking out the throwing knives he hid there and throwing them. The dim lighting slowed the knights' reactions, and the throwing knife pierced cleanly into the thigh of the knight that was in front.

"Guh..."

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The knight who was stabbed lost his balance and toppled over. However, the other knights showed no sign of stopping; they must have been experienced in combat. Rio analyzed them calmly.

“Surround him!”

The knights went for the surefire tactic and scattered to surround Rio. But Rio accelerated, breaking out of the circle before the knights could enclose him and closed in on the knights instead.

“Wha…”

The knights were taken by surprise at the unexpected speed, despite their experience. Rio dashed between the knights like he was leaping—his movements were near-acrobatic, as though he was flowing or dancing.

He didn’t give them the chance to surround him. Both his hands and feat danced as he passed by them, dealing sure damage to the knights. The knights tried to attack back by swinging their swords, but the trajectory that their swords drew wasn’t able to catch Rio.

“Damn it! What’s with this guy?!”

“H-He’s strong!”

The knights were being toyed with by Rio’s acrobatic movements, causing their restlessness to rise to the surface. Just by having Rio pass them once, one knight would be slashed at with a dagger while another was sent flying with a kick—half of the knights had been whittled away. The remaining knights—including Charles—glared at Rio, but a moment later, he leaped to the side with no warning.

“W-What?”

It was almost like Rio had disappeared, causing a delayed reaction amongst Charles and the other knights. Then, Rio reappeared, charging at them from the side. He leaped through the gap between two knights lined up and passed them, flipping upside-down midair and knocking them both out with a single blow to the knees.

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“D-Don’t mess with me!”

Another knight swung his sword, aiming for the moment Rio was to land on the ground. But Rio lightly pushed his hand against the ground and twisted his body, shifting his landing point to avoid the attack. On top of that, he used the momentum from twisting his body to slash his dagger through the air, cutting down his opponent as he turned.

That left three knights remaining: Charles, who was watching the combat from a distance, and two regular knights.

“H-Hey! Finish him already!” Charles yelled in a panic. His order had changed from being cocky to needing the hammer to fall, which was probably a reasonable decision, considering how fast the knights who had enough strength to overpower an entire infantry squad were eliminated.

However, whether the two remaining knights were able to finish Rio was another problem.

“Guh… Haaah!”

One of the knights yelled as he tried to fulfill the order, slashing at Rio.

Rio swung the dagger he held reverse in his left hand, knocking away the knight with his arm strength that was heightened by spirit arts. The knight grimaced at a numbing pain that ran through his hand, the recoil of his blow like he had cut an iron wall instead.

“Ngh…” The final remaining knight swung his sword in desperation. Rio crouched low to avoid the attack. He then proceeded to knock out the opponent’s feet from under him, standing up promptly to stomp on his abdomen and knock him out.

Charles watched on, dumbfounded that the subordinates he boasted about had been defeated so helplessly. There was no one remaining capable of battle left, so he ranted hysterically. “…S-Stop screwing around! All of you, stand up! What are you doing?!”

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“U-Ugh…”

Fortunately, no one had died yet, but there were several who had been cut open and were in danger of bleeding out.

“Tch…” Charles suddenly started running back the way he had come. He had probably determined there was no way for him to win when his allies had all been taken out in an instant.

It’s almost refreshing how fast he decided to abandon his comrades.

Rio blinked at Charles’ retreating back. It would be simple to catch up.

Should I give him random information to cause confusion?

To head to Rodania from Cleia, any of the east, north, or south roads could be used. With people having fled from both the north and south, Charles was left with no choice but to send pursuers in both directions.

There was already enough confusion, but adding even more chaos to the situation here was another option. Thinking that, Rio closed in on Charles from behind.

“?!” An arrow of lightning came flying from the direction of the city’s south gate. Rio reflexively took a step back to evade it, then augmented his vision with body enhancement and stared in the direction the arrow had been fired from. There, on the wall above the south gate, roughly 600 meters away—

“Shigekura… Rui?”

The hero he met at the banquet just the other day was aiming his bow at Rio. Even now, a lightning attack was flying at him.

He can aim so accurately from such a long distance…

Lightning arrows were fired consecutively to keep Rio in check, all while making sure to avoid the unconscious knights. Rio was impressed by his level of sniping ability.

“ALFRED! You’re late!” Charles suddenly screamed as he

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ran with all his strength. As for who he was screaming at so loudly…

"If you announce the reinforcements, then there's no point of an ambush. Fool."

Alfred had been dashing at full speed, his body stooped over to avoid Rio's notice. Thanks to Charles yelling his name so loudly, Rio was alerted of his presence early.

I've fought that man before while Professor Celia and I escaped the wedding ceremony… There's no mistaking it. It's the King's Sword.

Rio recalled that he was as skilled as his nickname implied. Alfred excelled at close-quarters combat, while Rui excelled at long-range sniping. It would be difficult to take them both on at the same time.

…Looks like it's about time. Rio about-faced and started to run. He glanced back to see Alfred showing no signs of pursuing him; he seemed to be prioritizing the treatment of the wounded knights.

Meanwhile, Rui still had his bow held ready. The next moment, he aimed towards the sky for some reason—and fired a particularly powerful shot of lightning.

Where is he aiming? No, he must have some plan… Ah, so that's what it is!

Rio had been watching where the attack ended up, but the giant bolt of lightning suddenly split itself and changed course. Seeing them aiming for the ground made him realize their purpose.

It's much slower than before, but…

It was faster than Rio could run. And it seemed like they were homing onto him, following Rio's movements in a terrible manner, closing the distance between them.

Can I dodge them at that speed just by watching? The impact field should be pretty wide to prevent me from evading. If so…

Rio kept running as he thought, trying to widen the

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distance as much as he could before suddenly coming to a stop and turning to face the rain of lightning. Then, he waited until the attack was nearly upon him.

He used wind spirit arts to wrap his body in a barrier of soft wind, creating a path for the electricity to run through and remove its homing function, then he ran through the gaps towards the lightning rain himself. He then twisted his body to deftly slip past all the lightning bolts.

“W-What?!”

Charles witnessed Rio avoiding the lightning rain from afar and couldn’t help but raise his voice in alarm. Rio landed on the ground in that time, confirming there weren’t any further pursuers before leaving without a second thought.

“...Hahaha.”

Rui’s face broke into a smile as though to commend Rio’s acrobatic evasion of his rain of lightning.

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At the same time, Christina and Celia's group had made it through the wheat fields and were running down the road through the forest.

"Hah… Hah… How much further… do we have to run?" Kouta panted.

"Keep going! Don't waste a single second of the time Sir Amakawa bought us!" Vanessa yelled from where she ran in the lead.

"Eek…" Kouta's upperclassman, Rei, wailed in a pitiable voice.

Celia and Christina were in a similar state, having already passed the limits of their stamina long ago. However, they shared Vanessa's feelings and continued running desperately.

Ten more seconds passed like that, when everything in Vanessa's field of view suddenly went dark.

"…What?" She looked up towards the sky, questioning.

"MROOOR!"

A pitch-black minotaur came falling out of the sky with a rumbling impact. On top of that—

"ROOOAR!"

Crash. There was another one behind them.

"Wha…"

The party had come to a stop before they realized it, staring upwards in a daze.

"What… are those…?" Rei stiffened.

"That… was at the academy during the outdoor drill that one time…" Christina recalled the time they encountered a minotaur at the academy's outdoor drill and paled.

"I-It's a minotaur! W-Why is it here?!" Celia, who had actually witnessed one before, yelled.

"MROO!"

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“BRREH HEH!”

The minotaurs laughed heartily with their warped faces.

“T-There’s more… coming from the forest…”

Vanessa was about to suggest escaping into the forest when a group of orcs noisily made their way out from between the trees. They were completely surrounded on all sides.

With none of them able to move, they stood there as still as can be. Then, the minotaur behind Celia extended its left hand, reaching for Christina. However—

“MROOR?!”

The black giant was unable to grab onto her body, as it was blown away forcefully from the side, crashing into the orcs by the forest loudly. Meanwhile, the spot where the head of the minotaur had just been was replaced by Alma.

“A-Alma?!” Celia muttered her name in shock. Alma must have swung her mace into the minotaur’s head from behind, as she landed on the ground in a stance to catch her momentum.

“Guh… Grrguh…” The beaten-up minotaur tried to stand up weakly, but failed.

“We’ll cover you! Please fall back!”

Another voice that Celia recognized rang out. A silver flash passed by her—it was the silver werewolf, Sara. Sara approached the minotaur struggling to get up and cut off its head without giving it a chance to react.

“Grr…”

The defeated minotaur disappeared into ashes. However, the area was still swarmed with orcs, some which had been crushed just moments ago. Sara immediately stepped back and distanced herself from the remaining orcs.

She was replaced by a rain of countless light arrows, piercing through the bodies of the orcs gathered. The one who attacked was the high elf standing ten or so meters away from the group—Orphia—holding a bow.

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“W-Why… are you guys…?” Celia asked the newly-arrived, dumbfounded. The three of them had the physical traits of their species altered into human ears through magic artifacts.

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“We came to assist. Was it unnecessary?” Sara asked a little awkwardly.

“N-No, you saved us…”

“It’s not over yet. Let’s clean up the remaining big guy and the orcs in the forest,” Alma said, holding the mace in her hand ready.

“Celia, please fall back to where Orphia is with the others.” Sara glared at the minotaur standing before them.

Christina was bewildered by the rapidly-changing situation. She turned to Celia in confusion. “P-Professor Celia, who are these girls…?”

“These three are Haruto’s friends. At any rate, everyone! Come this way!” Celia gave a short answer and pulled Christina’s arm, giving an order to Rei and Kouta standing beside them on the way. Meanwhile, Vanessa was holding her sword up against the orcs.

“O-Okay…” Despite how she had stiffened up, Christina retreated at Celia’s guidance.

“MROOOR!” The remaining minotaur roared to intimidate the escaping party and leaped into the air.

“Did you think we would falter at something like that?” Alma looked up at the minotaur in disgust.

“We’ve been underestimated, it seems. Orphia, force it back!” Sara glared at the minotaur sharply as she directed Orphia behind her.

“Yup!” With a nod, Orphia quickly fired arrows of light from her bow. The thick beams of light flew straight through the air and towards the body of the soaring minotaur.

“Gragh?!”

The minotaur promptly used the stone greatsword in its hand to block the arrows, but was knocked back by the impact.

“Wha…” Christina watched the scene with wide eyes. The attack just now had enough power to be a higher class of intermediate magic, yet it was impossible to fire that in less

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than a second with the knowledge within Strahl region.

Could that bow be an ancient artifact? She looked at the beautiful bow in Orphia's hand. However, while she pondered that, Alma and Sara abruptly disappeared.

"Alma, slam it into the ground! I'll finish it off!"

"You don't need to tell me twice."

Sara started dashing in the direction the minotaur was blown in while Alma leaped high into the air with her mace braced. The two of them had physical abilities that far surpassed those of humans.

"MROR?!" Alma, with her petite size, slammed her mace into the minotaur's giant body, making it rapidly change directions and crash into the ground.

Sara caught up to the minotaur in the brief moment its body was rebounding back into the air and cleanly sliced off its head. The next time the pitch black body hit the ground, it dispersed into ash.

This left the orcs lurking in the forest.

"Grr, guh…"

The violent orcs seemed to be cowering after watching the minotaurs get overwhelmed so easily.

"Gragh?!"

Orphia released numerous arrows of light at once, eliminating the orcs in a matter of moments. Each arrow was pinpoint-accurate with no sign of missing their targets. As a result, the orcs were completely wiped out in a flash.

"…There are no more presences."

"It seems like all the monsters have been eliminated."

Sara and Alma swept their eyes over the forest around them as they approached Celia and the others.

"Good work, you two," Orphia giggled.

"?!"

Suddenly, the three of them assumed their battle stances towards the forest. The next moment, a black flash of light weaved its way through the trees, aiming their way—but it

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wasn't targeted at Sara, Orphia, Alma, nor Celia.

"Huh?"

The target was Christina.

By the time they realized this, the rapidly-moving black light was right before their eyes and they were unable to move, rooted to the spot. It was the perfect surprise attack with no trace of the assailant—nobody present was able to react.

It was too late to evade. Just as they thought that, a dark shadow cut before Christina. It was, of course—

"...H-Haruto!"

Celia's eyes shined the moment she recognized him. Rio held his sword in his hand to take on the black light from head-on—when, the next moment, he swung his sword and completely erased the light.

Clap, clap, clap. Just then, someone started applauding from within the forest. The sound of the clapping gradually grew louder until a person soon appeared.

"Ah, how splendid. I was thinking of assisting when you all encountered so many unforeseen enemies, but they were taken care of so quickly."

Reiss clapped as he walked out of the forest, commending Rio and the others.

"...You." Rio narrowed his eyes. It was a face he recognized—the person who had taken Lucius away after he cornered him during the monster attack on Amande.

"I'm honored that you remember me. My name is Reiss, a member of the Heavenly Lions." Reiss introduced himself not as an ambassador of the Proxia Empire, but as a mercenary.

"After Amande, I'm assuming these monsters were your doing as well?" Rio asked.

"Why, I would never. How could one even control such monsters? Didn't I just say I was thinking of assisting?" Reiss shrugged, exaggerating his feigned ignorance.

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“Then what was that final attack you aimed at Princess Christina?”

“Oh my, are you accusing me?”

“Who else could it be?”

“There could be another enemy hiding, no?” Reiss answered with a grin.

“The enemy is you.” Rio glared at Reiss with suspicion. The same went for everyone else present.

“No, no, I have no intention of fighting here. I was just visiting Cleia by chance when I noticed you, so I thought I’d say hello. It seemed like you were caught up in your own business, so I couldn’t find the right timing to do so,” Reiss said in a smooth voice. He suddenly remembered something and added in a delighted tone, “Oh, that’s right. The one you have a connection with is doing quite well, too.”

“…Where is Lucius?” Rio asked coldly.

Celia and the others around them listened silently to the conversation, unable to keep up with the situation, but they noticed the air around Rio was more tense than usual and gulped.

“He holds a fairly large grudge towards you, so you’ll be reunited sooner or later. From the avenger to the avengee, if you will… Human karma is a truly difficult concept. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Reiss smiled provocatively, but Rio’s expression did falter.

“Isn’t that right, Rio?” Reiss said with a grin.

“Guh…”

Celia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma swallowed their breath on Rio’s behalf. How did he know Rio’s name, they wondered. But on the other hand—

…Rio? Wh…?!

Christina was wide-eyed as she stared at the back of the person who just saved her. Instantly, all her suspicions about the person named Haruto Amakawa were answered, everything connecting together like a puzzle. She

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inadvertently gulped. It wasn't as though she accepted it as the absolute truth. Perhaps, just perhaps… Such feelings of denial also rose within her. But, despite that…

"…"

Rio lifted his sword and watched Reiss sharply, ready to slice into him at a moment's notice.

"Oh dear. I will take my leave now, so please put away that dangerous-looking sword." Reiss held both his hands out before him, dramatically stating his refusal to fight.

"…"

Rio continued glaring at Reiss, expression unchanged.

"Of course, I can keep you company if you insist, but if you dawdle around here the pursuers may catch up, no? You seem to have multiple burdensome people in tow… it would be a shame if they were targeted first in battle. Would you be able to protect them all if it came down to it? You don't even know the limits of my power yet, hmm?"

Do you still want to try, anyway? Reiss' smile implied.

"…Disappear before I change my mind."

"My my, how scary. Then, if you would excuse me."

At that, Reiss retreated back into the forest. Rio watched his back with a grim expression.

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Afterword

Everyone—thank you for reading. This is Yuri Kitayama. I'd like to extend my gratitude to everyone who picked up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Vol. 11 — Sonata of Beginnings*.

So, Volume 11 of Seirei Gensouki is now on sale!

Now, as mentioned previously in the Volume 10 afterword, part two of the series starts as of volume 11. Just because part two has started doesn't mean anything major will change, though, haha. However, points of foreshadowing strewn across those ten volumes will be newly addressed, and existing relationships will have even more opportunities to change… I believe.

Volume 11 was given the subtitle "Sonata of Beginnings," meaning "part two starts now" and "here's a sneak peek into things." I hope everyone will continue to enjoy this series.

Furthermore, web novel readers may notice some curious differences between the web novel and light novel from this point onwards. With the story already as different as it is, there should be quite a few changes brought on by the butterfly effect! I can't say what specifically as that would be a spoiler, hehe.

For the record, there are several points in Volume 11 where I purposefully stuck to the plot of the web novel, but even then, I included many modifications that will later lead to more butterfly effects, so please look forward to how Volume 12 and onwards differs from the web novel!

And now for a very important announcement. It's already been announced online, and it should be mentioned in the packaging of this volume as well, but…

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The drama CD version of Seirei Gensouki has been confirmed! Voices will be given to the characters inside the world of Seirei Gensouki! The characters will SPEAK!

Who's going to appear? What will the story be about? Who's in the cast? Details such as these haven't been decided at the point of writing this afterword, but the plan is to sell it this winter as a special edition of Volume 12, so I hope everyone looks forward to that as well.

Finally, thank you from the bottom of my heart to all the readers and staff involved in supporting Seirei Gensouki! I hope I'll be able to continue connecting with everyone through my works for a long time in the future. I shall wrap up here this time—let's meet again in Volume 12!

Early August 2018
Yuri Kitayama

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Bonus Short Story

The Bored Princess

In the Galarc Kingdom's royal castle, several days after Rio departed with Miharu…

Charlotte was spending her free time drinking tea in the rooftop garden exclusively used by the royal family. The only people with her were her attendant and guard knight—she had no conversation partner to talk to.

"It really is boring without Sir Haruto around…"

Charlotte looked up at the clear blue sky and sighed listlessly, thinking of the boy who had appeared the day before the banquet commenced.

Rio was the savior of important figures like Liselotte and Flora. He was also appointed as an honorary knight after making a sudden heroic appearance and repelling a demi-dragon's breath with his enchanted sword, showing up at the castle with Satsuki's good friend Miharu, then showing off his military skills during the banquet itself. He even played a large role in promptly stopping the uproar that Takahisa caused, making him the center of many topics of conversation as of late.

"What did I do in my free time before I met Sir Haruto? If I recall correctly…"

She used to spend her time finding enjoyment from teasing and bothering the young noblemen and boys that approached her, and by observing the twisted human

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relationships between people. But now that Rio was her greatest person of her interest, doing the same things as before didn't feel as fun.

"Oh, it really is so boring without Sir Haruto around. It's fun talking about him with Lady Satsuki, but I can't make her keep me company for the whole day…"

Rio and Miharu's appearance at the castle made Satsuki lower her guard towards the Galarc Kingdom by a fair amount, but that didn't mean the distance between them had vanished completely. Though she invited Charlotte to tea more casually and frequently than before, Satsuki was busy with her studies and training, so Charlotte couldn't occupy too much of her time. That being said…

"But the distance between us finally lessened because of Sir Haruto's presence. It might be interesting to take this opportunity to learn something new together with Lady Satsuki."

With that decided, Charlotte stood up immediately.

"I'm going to pay Lady Satsuki a visit," she said, announcing her third visit to Satsuki's room for the day.

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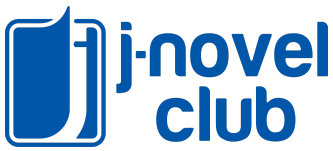

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